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Full Name of Author — Nom complet de l'auteur

Michael James BAILEY

Date of Birth — Date de naissance	Country of Birth — Lieu de naissance
Oct. 14, 1956	Canada

Permanent Address — Résidence fixe

6088 Michener Park
Edmonton, Alta.

Title of Thesis — Titre de la thèse

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1982	J. G. Marino

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Evil as Privation in King Lear

by

Michael Bailey

(C)

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

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PERMANENT ADDRESS:

608 C Michener Park.....

Edmonton, Alta.....

.....

DATED October 14 1982

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled Evil as Privation in King Lear submitted by Michael Bailey in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

James L. Marino
.....
Supervisor

Linda Woodbridge
.....

R. Potter
.....

Date. October 14/1982

Dedication

for Margaret

Abstract

It is impossible when writing on *King Lear* not to write on evil as well. In considering the work as a whole one must consider the nature and agency of evil, for the play probes this wound in human existence to sensitive and painful depths. Critics, therefore, have spent much time over the centuries discussing the evil in *Lear*, some even offering theories of what Shakespeare understood evil to be. None of the attempts to learn Shakespeare's understanding of evil, however, took into consideration a doctrine of evil that pervaded Elizabethan society - the doctrine of evil as privation.

This doctrine was the undisputed understanding of evil in Renaissance Europe. Gaining a firm foothold in the ancient world in the writings of Plotinus and the early Church Fathers, including Augustine, the doctrine steadily grew in strength and stature until, in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, it was unquestioned. Asserting that God created all things and, thus, that all things are good, the doctrine taught that evil is *not* a part of creation but only an aberration or absence of the good that *is* creation. It is really nothing, and the only existence it has is in the privation of that which is. As it grows it destroys creation and, by destroying that upon which its own existence depends, moves toward its own destruction. Its very nature

and the consummation of its activity is, ultimately, nothing.

The nature and agency of the evil in *King Lear* can be understood as privation. Not only does the evil in the play grow at the expense of the good - not only do the evil characters feed upon the good characters - but the very nature of man himself is violated by the activity of evil. In his created state or essential condition the human being is absolutely good. Evil in human existence, however, is the privation of this goodness and the ontological violation of human being itself. Hence the tormented pre-occupation in *Lear* with nature and the unnatural on the one hand, and evil on the other. Indeed these pre-occupations are two sides of the same coin. Evil is unnatural because it is the violation of being. As the evil characters in *Lear* feed off the good characters, growing in strength at the expense of their prey, therefore, we see evil at work as privation. Moreover, these evil characters are throughout referred to as being unnatural.

As these evil characters grow in power and assurance, however, they ironically move rapidly toward their deaths. Indeed they destroy themselves. It is true that *some* of the good characters are dead at the end, but so are *all* of the evil characters. They have destroyed the particular good upon which they have been preying, but they destroy themselves in the process. As the doctrine teaches, evil has no life of its own and, once the good upon which its life

depends has been consumed, it perishes.

At the play's end we are left with the knowledge that being persists in spite of the destruction of evil. Evil is limited to its own power to destroy and cannot share in the essence of creation which is goodness. Evil passes, but goodness persists.

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I also thank my supervisor, Professor J.G. Marino, who encouraged me to freely explore, and yet through careful guidance would not allow me to get lost. He supported my work patiently and tolerantly, yet by occasionally opposing my reading of the play provoked me into a more cautious consideration and statement of my ideas. Whatever carelessness or heavy-handedness may yet remain is the result of my own stubbornness, in spite of his efforts.

Thanks mostly, though, to Margaret, who understands.

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I. EVIL AS PRIVATION IN *KING LEAR*

With the possible exception of *Macbeth*, no play in Shakespeare's canon can equal the dark and brutal vision of evil presented to us in *King Lear*. It was written during a period that also produced *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and one can fairly well assume that Shakespeare was particularly and very seriously concerned with evil and the nature of evil at this point in his career. All three tragedies pursue an understanding of evil with the determination and concentration of complete and courageous honesty. The result, in the case of *King Lear* even more so than *Macbeth*, is an unremittingly painful exploration and demonstration of the agency and nature of evil, not only in human affairs but in the entire cosmos.

That being so, we are compelled to ask: In his sincere attempt to reveal and understand evil in *King Lear*, what did Shakespeare mean by evil? For him, evil is unnatural. Following a doctrine which was prevalent in his day, he held that all of creation - all of nature - is good, and evil is simply the privation of good. In *King Lear* he demonstrates that the problem of evil is fundamentally an ontological problem, a question of ontological violation. Nature or 'the natural', properly understood, expresses the fullness of being, but evil is the absence or privation of being; it is

destructive and *un*natural. It is essentially nothing, he shows, and will always come to nothing. It is something which can only be understood as a negative and never as a positive kind of thing. It is real, but whatever reality it has is, paradoxically, a false reality. It rages for a while, but in time destroys itself and is gone. It is non-being.

It would be wrong, of course, to claim that this doctrine was the only explanation of evil available in Elizabethan England, or that it is the only explanation or understanding of evil discernable in the play. Another major renaissance view saw evil as either froward or forward excess, and whether these two explanations - privation and excess - are mutually exclusive conceptions of evil is not at issue here. My claim is simply that the doctrine of evil as privation goes some way toward an explanation of the evil in *King Lear*. Although it would be immoderate to suggest that Shakespeare actually wrote the tragedy to elucidate the doctrine, nonetheless the doctrine *was* prevalent in his day and it is not immoderate to suggest that the evil in the play can, to a considerable extent, be understood in terms of the doctrine. The doctrine may not be the exclusive explanation of evil in *Lear*, but it certainly is a major one.

* * *

One of the most notable features of *King Lear* is that the evil in the play seems not to be an independent force of its own but rather draws from, and grows at the expense of, another power or force already existing. The presence of disease and parasite imagery in the play, for instance, is worth considering. In the final scene Kent and Albany refer to Lear's decline as a "decay" (11.287;296),[1] and although the verb 'to decay' can mean very generally 'to fall into ruin', it can also mean 'to decompose' or 'rot', and in this latter sense "decay" concludes a pattern of disease imagery that runs throughout the play. In IV,vi, for instance, Oswald refers to Gloucester's decline as "th' infection of his fortune" (1.230), but the disease imagery is most completely and vividly developed in association with Lear's tragedy. In his protest against Lear in the first scene, Kent cries:

> Kill thy physician, and the fee bestow
> Upon the foul disease. Revoke thy gift;
> Or, whilst I can vent clamour from my throat,
> I'll tell thee thou dost evil. (I,i,162-5)

Kent is suggesting that Lear is feeding a disease by favouring Goneril and Regan and banishing Cordelia, and is thus doing evil by creating a situation in which evil comes alive. To do evil in this sense is to set evil in motion, to provide the proper atmosphere in which the evil may grow, or, in Lear's case, to feed the disease: to establish

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[1] The text of *King Lear*, from which quotations are taken and to which references are made throughout this thesis, is the Arden edition edited by Kenneth Muir (1952; revised, 1972; rpt. London: Methuen,1975).

himself as the host of a devouring parasite.[2]

This relationship between host and parasite is also bound up in the play with the relationship between father and daughter. In II,iv, when his daughters are so ruthless with him, Lear realizes that they do, indeed, come from him, but that they are only a corruption of him. Directing his comments to Goneril he states:

> But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
> Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
> Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,
> A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle,
> In my corrupted blood. (II,iv,219-23)

In this scene the daughter's evil strengthens, and in these lines Lear points out that the growing evil is, in some way, a part of him. Indeed the evil grows upon him - it is a "disease that's in [his] flesh." The imagery of Lear's speech suggests that the relationship between him and Goneril is not merely daughter-father, but also one of disease and corruption: parasite-host. He *has* given her life and nourished her, but he has done so as a host would a parasite, as a healthy body would a disease. Images of the young gaining strength and nourishment by devouring that which has given them life (the parent) appear elsewhere in the play as well. In III,iv Lear refers to Regan and Goneril as "those pelican daughters" (1.74), alluding to the bird

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[2] In "The Two Natures in *King Lear*" in Accent, vol.8, 1947-48, Robert B. Heilman, commenting on Lear's denunciation of Goneril at II,iv,219-23, states that "disease means receptivity to disease, and if Lear suffers from an infection, it is because he is in some way hospitable to that infection."(p.55)

that fed its young with its own blood, and in I,iv the Fool, referring to Lear's relationship with his daughters, states that "the hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,/ That it's had it head bit off by it young." (11.213-14) Imagery of disease and parasites in *King Lear* is part of the depiction of the relationship between Lear and his daughters, and both this imagery and this relationship help elucidate, and are involved in, the agency of evil as a devouring force.

Kent and the Fool recognize that the filial relationship is bound up with the evil in this play. We have already seen that both Kent and the Fool feel that Lear, by giving so much power to Goneril and Regan, has become the host for parasites. Both characters are aware that the daughters' power, which in the course of the play is used to destroy Lear, originates in Lear himself. Their power comes directly from him, and without this power they, and their evil, could have done nothing; they would have initiated nothing. The Fool understands that the power - the evil - that moves against Lear paradoxically comes from himself insofar as his daughters have come from him, but more so because Lear himself has given them their power. The power that has quickened their evil comes from Lear's division of the kingdom, and their evil could not exist and operate without this initial gift.[3]

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[3] In discussing the power that Goneril and Regan have in the play, Harold Skulsky refers to Goneril's boast to Albany at V,iii,157-8 - "the laws are mine, not thine:/ Who can arraign me for't?" - and then suggests that "Goneril and Regan are destructive only because *they have been given* the

The folly of Lear's action is expressed by the Fool through the image of the man become child, the daughter become mother, but this image also points to the fact that what was once nothing - the power, and through the power the evil, of the daughters - is given life by, and turned upon, the King himself:

> **Lear**: When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?
> **Fool**: I have used it, Nuncle, e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav'st them the rod and putt'st down thine own breeches,
> Then they for sudden joy did weep,
> And I for sorrow sung,
> That such a king should play bo-peep,
> And go the fools among. (I,iv,167-74)[4]

This theme - that Lear has made his daughters his mothers - points out, not only Lear's folly, but also the fact that the evil in this play comes from Lear himself and that it has no positive existence or impulse of its own. Lear "*mad'st*" his daughters his mothers; he "*gav'st* them the rod and *putt'st* down [his] *own* breeches" - he was the impulse, and "*then* they for sudden joy did weep."

Just as the daughter is given life and nourishment by the father, so do Goneril and Regan grow in power and in

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[3](cont'd)wherewithal."(emphasis mine) Harold Skulsky, "*King Lear* and the Meaning of Chaos" in Shakespeare Quarterly, vol.XVII, 1966. p.9,fn.9.

[4] Compare the Fool's comments here with Goneril's assertion at I,iii,20-21 that "Old Fools are babes again, and must be us'd/ With checks as flatteries." Indeed, Lear's foolishness is not as serious as Goneril's evil use (or abuse) of him *in* his foolishness. Put another way, Lear's foolishness is serious only because it provides Goneril with her power, because it nourishes evil. This is the agonizing and brutal pathos that the Fool perceives.

evil by feeding on Lear. As Cordelia leaves her sisters in I,i, she does so with much misgiving:

> The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes
> Cordelia leaves you: I know you what you are;
> And like a sister am most loth to call
> Your faults as they are named. Love well our father:
> To your professed bosoms I commit him:
> But yet, alas! stood I within his grace,
> I would prefer him to a better place. (I,i,267-73)

Seconds later her words are even more ominous: "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides;/ Who covers faults, at last with shame derides." (I,i,279-80) Cordelia is very suspicious of her sisters' protestations of love and, knowing them quite well, she also suspects "plighted cunning" and covered faults. She is afraid that Lear's gift of power will be used against him, that his trust in his eldest daughters will be abused. Her fears are almost immediately realized when she leaves them, for as the scene closes - immediately following their rewards of power - they begin to plot the progressive weakening of Lear's authority which had given them their power in the first place:

> **Goneril**: ...Pray you, let us hit together: if our father carry authority with such disposition as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.
> **Regan**: We shall further think of it.
> **Goneril**: We must do something, and i'th'heat.
> (I,i,302-7)

Their power, the progressive "disease" that Kent referred to, immediately begins to feed upon its very source. The power that Goneril and Regan now enjoy is not naturally theirs. It does not originate in them but in Lear, and in order for it to grow it must draw from him. The plot to

take, progressively, all authority - all power - from him becomes the expression of the growth of evil in the play. This plan is clearly outlined by Goneril in her instructions to Oswald in I,iii:

> Put on what weary negligence you please,
> You and your fellows; I'd have it come to question:
> If he distaste it, let him to my sister,
> Whose mind and mine, I know, in that are one,
> Not to be over-rul'd. Idle old man,
> That still would manage those authorities
> That he hath given away! Now, by my life,
> Old fools are babes again, and must be us'd
> With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus'd.
> (I,iii,13-21)

Goneril's intention is to torment her father, to bring him to a rage ("I'd have it come to question"), presumably to create a situation in which she will be able to exercise her power ("Old fools...must be us'd/ With checks as flatteries") in order to diminish further, and take upon herself, "those authorities/ That he hath given away."[5]

In the sub-plot of the house of Gloucester there is further evidence to suggest that evil exists and operates in the play in only a parasitic sense because of Edgar's and Gloucester's innocent credulity. At the close of Edmund's first soliloquy we learn that he grows and prospers by attacking the "legitimate" Edgar ("Edmund the base- Shall top th' legitimate--: I grow, I prosper"), but the decay of

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[5] Immediately following these instructions to Oswald, Goneril continues:

> And let his knights have colder looks among you;
> What grows of it, no matter; advise your fellows so:
> I would breed from hence occasions, and I shall,
> That I may speak: I'll write straight to my sister
> To hold my very course. (I,iii,23-27)

Edgar's legitimacy that Edmund intends is, paradoxically, not fundamentally the result of Edmund's own initiative but the consequence of Edgar's, and Gloucester's, naive natures. This fact that Edmund's evil depends upon Edgar and Gloucester is recognized by Edmund himself:

> A credulous father, and a brother noble
> Whose nature is so far from doing harms
> That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
> My practices ride easy! (I,iii,176-9)

Edmund manipulates his father and brother so well because their natures are malleable; it is upon their unsuspecting natures that his practices "ride easy". As with Goneril and Regan, Edmund's evil feeds off of his two victims, and as he rises and grows they decline and decay. By the beginning of Act II, Gloucester has been completely duped by Edmund. He has issued an order for Edgar's arrest, but more significantly he sees *Edmund* as his "loyal and natural boy", so much so, in fact, that he means to transfer his land, and with it Edgar's rights as heir, to Edmund:

> ...besides his picture
> I will send far and near, that all the kingdom
> May have due note of him; and of my land,
> Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means
> To make thee capable. (II,i,80-84)

It is clear that Edmund's position grows at the expense of Edgar's, which in turn comes from, and is a part of, Gloucester. Edmund's evil grows with his power, and his power grows by consuming Edgar's power. Moreover, he increases in his father's favour through his lies, and in these lies one again sees Edmund, and his evil, grow at

Edgar's expense. Edmund has limited worth, in his father's eyes at least, on his own. He is able to augment his worth, however, by drawing to himself the worth of Edgar through his lies. His worth increases by destroying Edgar's worth.

Not only Edgar feeds Edmund's evil, however: it grows at Gloucester's expense as well. In III,iii Gloucester gives Edmund information "dangerous to be spoken", and reveals his sympathy for the king, despite the fact that such sympathy is considered treasonous by Cornwall. He confides in his son and implores secrecy, but again Edmund violates Gloucester's trust to advance himself:

> This courtesy, forbid thee, shall the Duke
> Instantly know; and of that letter too:
> This seems a fair deserving, and must draw me
> That which my father loses; no less than all:
> The younger rises when the old doth fall. (III,iii,21-5)

Gloucester's "courtesy" will be his downfall because it will be used by Edmund to further his plan; by it Edmund's evil will grow. This evil grows because of , and at the expense of, Gloucester and Gloucester's goodness: "This courtesy...must draw me/ That which my father loses; no less than all."[6]

The evil of Goneril and Regan, like Edmund's evil, is seen not to be a positive kind of thing but rather a negative force that can merely destroy and diminish Lear and all that he has. In Act II, scene iv, for example, Regan and Goneril strip Lear of what little authority remains to him;

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[6] Indeed, when Edmund *does* betray his father to Cormwall he *is* made Earl of Gloucester. (III,v,16)

they diminish his power and draw it into themselves. They become increasingly confident and powerful as the scene progresses, but they do so *at the expense* of Lear's influence and power. They have already consumed what he has given and are now consuming more. As the play progresses from II,iv, moreover, Lear suffers increasing deprivation. Throughout Acts III and IV the audience witnesses Lear's solemn, progressive and very painful descent in deprivation towards the ultimate privation of death. First he loses his knights, then his respected stature as father and king, his power, all shelter, then comfort, then reason, then Cordelia and, finally, life itself. As the power of Goneril and Regan (and Cornwall) grows, so does their evil, and both - their power and their evil - depend upon the consumption of the king, from whom the power originates. The process of decay matches the growth of the evil; the latter depends upon the former, and as the evil grows - indeed for the evil *to* grow - Lear must be consumed.

In a similar way does the evil in the play depend upon Gloucester. In III,iii Gloucester tells Edmund that when he desired the leave of Cornwall and Regan that he "might pity" Lear, "they took from [him] the use of [his] own house." (11.2-3) Preying on him as it does Lear, the evil in the play begins to eat away at Gloucester too. First losing his

influence at home,[7] then his house itself, Gloucester is deprived by the evil forces in the play of his title (see III,v,16), his power as Earl, and his sight, until, like Lear, he is left with nothing: he becomes a banished, blind, stumbling beggar.[8] On their own, the evil figures in the play have only limited power and stature, and the titles, power and security that are bestowed upon them increase only as these figures consume the power and influence of the other characters in the play. As their evil develops it is seen to be simply a force of deprivation and destruction.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the evil in *King Lear* is also seen to be self-destructive. Because evil is merely that which destroys something already in existence, in consuming the source of its existence it must also destroy itself - and so do the evil characters in *King Lear* destroy themselves. Several characters throughout the play mention, for instance, that a state of enmity is developing between the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall: Curan at II,i,10-13; Kent at III,i,19-21; and Gloucester at III,iii,8-9. The weakness this division creates in the kingdom not only invites upon itself destruction from without (Kent states that "from France there comes a power/

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[7] Gloucester's behavior in II,iv demonstrates this loss of influence.

[8] Edgar's story is also the story of deprivation, and as such parallels, or is in fact part of, Lear's and Gloucester's stories. As we have seen, Edmund feeds upon and draws substance from Edgar, depriving Edgar correspondingly. Thus, as Edmund and his evil grow, Edgar is reduced to "the basest and most poorest shape/ That ever penury, in contempt of man,/ Brought near to beast." (I,iii,7-9)

Into this scatter'd kingdom; who already...have secret feet/ In some of our best ports." - III,i,30-33), but also represents evil as self-inimical and ultimately self-destructive. Once the kingdom falls into evil hands it becomes a disharmonious world of instability. The evil has weakened or diseased a once healthy state and in so doing precipitates its own destruction. As an individual, moreover, Cornwall is also destroyed by his *own* evil: he dies as a direct consequence of his brutal punishment of Gloucester in III,vii, which in turn is simply part of the evil that has dominated him and driven him all along. This same evil that motivates him, one could say, eventually destroys him; the evil consumes itself.

In the physical lust they share for Edmund, and in the resulting competition which ensues between them, Goneril and Regan become even more severely pitted against each other than they are for reasons of political ambition. The suspicions provoked by their lust and jealousy eventually result in murder and suicide, and again the evil in the play is shown to be self-destructive. Indeed, at the end of the play all the evil characters are dead. It is of course true that many of the good characters are also dead, but not all of them. Some of the good characters live on, but Shakespeare shows quite clearly that evil does not survive in the play, and that in fact it destroys itself.

The exploration or study of evil in *King Lear* is also inextricably bound up with the question of nature. During the period when his imagination was most concerned with the question of evil, Shakespeare was also concerned with the natural and the unnatural. *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, for instance, are not only the two plays most unflinchingly and concentratedly concerned with the dark horrors of evil, but also most fully concerned with nature and its violation. Throughout *King Lear* the evil characters and their acts are often referred to as unnatural. Gloucester erroneously calls Edgar "unnatural, detested, brutish villain," (I,ii,73-4) and refers to the activities of Goneril, Regan and Cornwall as "unnatural dealings". (III,iii,1-2) Kent asserts that "nature disclaims in [Oswald]," (II,ii,52) Lear calls his daughters "unnatural hags," (II,iv,276) and Albany tells Goneril that "she that will herself sliver and disbranch/ From her material sap, perforce must wither/ And come to deadly use." (IV,ii,34-6) Evil is understood to be a violation of nature. Indeed the word for evil in much of the play is 'unnatural' which reflects, in the negative prefix, its negative character in the play.

* * *

From the preceding discussion one is able to gain some insight into the total conception or understanding of evil that *King Lear* presents. Evil is, in essence, nothing. It is

not a positive force of its own but only draws from that which already exists. It is also understood to be unnatural, therefore, for nature is simply that which is or has been created, and insofar as evil consumes that which is or has been created it is unnatural. Just as it is the negation of nature and the natural, so is it the negation of existence or being. It is pure destruction, nothing positive, and as it consumes being it consumes itself. In time, by killing that which it lives on, evil kills itself. It is nothing, and it tends toward nothing.

This description, or more properly demonstration, of the nature and the agency of evil given in *King Lear* corresponds precisely to the teaching of a doctrine which was current in Shakespeare's England. This doctrine taught that evil has no created essence of its own but exists only as the privation of good. All that is comes from God, and all that comes from God is good. In the state in which they were created, moreover, all creatures participate fully in their essential being or nature, and evil can only exist and does only exist by corrupting this created essence or nature. It is therefore understood to be unnatural, tending toward non-being, and destroying itself by destroying the good upon which it feeds. The similarities between the understanding of evil presented in *King Lear* and the teaching of this doctrine are great enough, I believe, to suggest a direct influence. That is, Shakespeare's conception of evil presented in *King Lear* was informed by

this medieval doctrine of evil as privation.

It is not surprising to find a medieval doctrine of evil in a play so closely associated, by many critics, with medieval aesthetics and habits of thought. A.C. Bradley suggests that *King Lear* discloses "a mode of imagination not so very far removed from the mode with which, we must remember, Shakespeare was perfectly familiar in Morality plays and in the *Fairy Queen*."[9] Danby also mentions the connection with Spenser and the Morality play and suggests, as does Bradley, that Shakespeare's manner of thinking may very likely have been "nearer to the medieval habits"[10] than we may sometimes believe:

> ...he is a contemporary of Spenser, and stands closer than we do to the Morality. The people of his stories can have a direct relation to ideas behind the story (as they can in Spenser), and story, finally, can exist independantly for its own sake: and it, too, can have direct access to the body of meaning that informs it. Shakespeare, that is, has not utterly left behind him the mental habits and the artistic attitudes of the Middle Ages.[11]

Shakespeare could not but have been part of the traditions of the late Middle Ages for he was growing up in the 1570's when Moralities were still performed and the intellectual

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[9] Bradley, p.265.
[10] Danby, p.123.
[11] Danby, pp.121-2. A page later Danby again reminds us that "Shakespeare stood closer to the allegorizing Middle Ages than we do now," and goes on to point out that "the second edition of Sir John Harington's *Orlando Furioso* appeared in 1607 with a commentary on each book still following the medieval interpretative scheme." (pp.122-3)

legacy for which they spoke was still very much alive. He could not very well have "utterly left behind him" the medieval world for he was, in part, its child.

Indeed the aged, venerable and still very active intellectual legacy of the Middle Ages influenced the thought, not only of Shakespeare, but of most if not all of his contemporaries. "Their explicit moral judgments were almost uniformly in accordance with the medieval tradition," suggests H.B. Parkes,[12] and L.C. Knights asserts that "in all the tragedies [Shakespeare] made dramatic use of ideas, deriving from the medieval period, that were common to his age."[13] He goes on to say, however, that "these ideas are never adopted uncritically; and in *Lear*, above all, there is a resolute refusal to *start from* anything that does not issue out of first-hand experience."[14] In the environment of intellectual turmoil in which Shakespeare was writing, such an approach could be the only one possible to an artist with intellectual integrity. Shakespeare did not ignore the questions, nor did he seek to evade or soften the reality of existence that he was exploring, but in the end he still adopts the traditional ideas. These ideas or beliefs are vindicated by reality - by life - itself: "the positives that emerge from this play are, indeed, fundamentally Christian values, but they are reached by an act of profound

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[12] H.B. Parkes, "Nature's Diverse Laws: The Double Vision of the Elizabethans" Sewanee Review, vol.58,1950, pp.404-05.
[13] L.C. Knights, p.232.
[14] Knights, p.232.

individual exploration."[15] Kenneth Muir also supports this view that the play finally asserts the traditional ideas when, considering the implications of the pagan setting of *Lear*, he paraphrases Spencer in stating that:

> The play is not, as some of our grandfathers believed, pessimistic and pagan: it is rather an attempt to provide an answer to the undermining of traditional ideas by the new philosophy that called all in doubt. Shakespeare goes back to a pre-Christian world and builds up from the nature of man himself, and not from revealed religion, those same moral and religious ideas that were being undermined.[16]

Because he shared in the cultural legacy of the late medieval world, Shakespeare's thought would have been largely influenced by the medieval intellectual tradition he had inherited.

His very intense and powerful study of evil in *King Lear*, therefore, would also be conditioned by this inherited tradition, a tradition which taught that evil is privation. This doctrine was the virtually undisputed understanding of the nature and agency of evil. Its lineage reaches back to Aristotle and passes through Plotinus, Augustine, the Greek and Latin Fathers, and, becoming the unquestioned teaching of medieval Christianity, it passed into the hands of

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[15] Knights, p.232.

[16] Kenneth Muir, from the Introduction to the Arden edition of King Lear, Kenneth Muir, ed. (1952; revised, 1972; rpt. London: Methuen,1975), p.1. Muir also goes on to suggest that J.C. Maxwell "was right when he said that *King Lear* is a Christian play about a pagan world.... The fact that Shakespeare can assume in his audience a different religious standpoint from that of any of his characters gives him a peculiar freedom, and makes possible an unusual complexity and richness." (p.1 from the Introduction)

Aquinas:

> Bequeathed to him through a millennium of Christian assertion and amplification, it received from him so definitive and exhaustive a formulation that thereafter it faded as an explicit object of formal polemic and became instead an a priori assumption in Christian metaphysics. Even during the fourteenth century storm of controversy over nominalism, the concept of evil as non-Being was not attacked.[17]

The doctrine not only survives into the Renaissance, but actually lives on in respected vigour. It appears, for instance, in Hooker, and one can safely assert that it was very present in the collective mind - at least in the religious education and perhaps even the catechism - of Elizabethan society:

> The privative nature of evil was to remain throughout the Renaissance a virtually unquestioned premise of the Christian world. Deeply ingrained in every Christian consciousness, the non-Being of evil functioned as more than mere theory; it became a point of departure for action, a basis for ethical choice. Primary expression of it occurred not in treatise but in deed, not in the cloister of speculation but in the arena of daily life.[18]

Shakespeare not only knew of this doctrine but his thought was actually conditioned by it . Indeed we see definite signs of its presence in his greatest study of evil, *King Lear*. We should consider at some length, therefore, the teachings of this doctrine before resuming, in greater detail, our study of the play.

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[17] Charlotte Spivack, The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage (London: Associated University Presses, 1978), p.21.
[18] Spivack, p.21.

II. THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

The doctrine of evil as privation has a long and illustrious history. It involved Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, and permeated medieval thought. Indeed its history did not merely follow a narrow channel restricted by the confines of Church teaching and doctrinal development, but spilled over into less ecclesiastical regions of thought. Most importantly, it found support and expression in the metaphor of the great chain of being.

The idea that evil is privation was derived from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book V, and it is upon this intellectual foundation that the Christian doctrine rests. Some (Aquinas among them)[19] have even cited Aristotle as an authority supporting the concept of evil as privation because in his *Nicomachaean Ethics* he states that "evil destroys even itself, and if it is complete becomes

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[19] In the *Summa Theologica*, part 1,qu.49,art.3 Aquinas states that "a supreme evil cannot be, for...even though evil may indefinitely diminish good it can never entirely consume it, and so, while good remains, there cannot be anything wholly and compeletely evil. The thought prompts Aristotle to remark that were evil total it would destroy itself, for the demolition of all good....would cut out from under evil its very basis." (St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, transl. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (London: Blackfriars,1967).)

unendurable."[20] These remarks of Aristotle, however, seem to provide rather weak evidence to support any claim of ancestry, and the link with Aristotle which medieval Christian thinkers tried to forge may be very fragile. Nonetheless, the doctrine *may* have been anticipated by him, although it does not really make another notable appearance until the *Enneads* of Plotinus. In the eighth tractate of the first Ennead, however, the understanding of evil as privation is unmistakably and forcefully stated. "If Evil exist at all," he writes in the first chapter, "it [is] situate in the realm of Non-Being, [it is] some mode, as it were, of the Non-Being," and in chapter five he asserts that "mere lack [of the good] brings merely Not-Goodness: Evil demands the absolute lack."[21] Not surprisingly, his is "a vision of evil which depends largely on Plato and is not far removed from Gnosticism,"[22] but still the concept of evil as privation or negation is here very significantly endorsed by a respected thinker and has therefore become an important part of the intellectual currency of the day.

The Greek Fathers of the early Church had also "pointed out the negative character of evil"[23] and thereby established the specifically Christian conception that was to persist for centuries. Drawing from the Old and New

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[20] Book IV, chapter v: 1126a12. Aristotle, Aristotle's Ethics, transl. John Warrington (London: Dent, 1963), p.84.
[21] Plotinus, The Enneads, transl. Stephen MacKenna, 3rd. edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), pp.67 and 70.
[22] Charles Journet, The Meaning of Evil, transl. Michael Barry (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1963) pp.28-29.
[23] Journet, p.30.

Testaments,[24] and probably also drawing from Plotinus, the Fathers recognized that evil is not part of creation - that it has no created existence of its own - but is only a privation. It was progressively developed by Origen (185-253), Methodius (d.311), Athanasius, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa(330-394)[25] until

> ...this "apophatic" definition of evil was considered, in Cappadocia in the second half of the fourth century, as an established doctrine. The bishops thought it a profitable thing to convey to the Christian people's minds. It was part of the Church's official teaching.[26]

Drawing in their turn from the tradition established by the Greek Fathers - continuing the Christian thought of Cappadocia - the two great Latin Fathers, Ambrose and Augustine, firmly established the concept as universal Christian doctrine. In Ambrose's *De Isaac et Anima*(ca.387) and the *Hexaemeron*(ca.389), and in Augustine's *Confessions* (ca.398) and *City of God*(ca.425), but especially his *De Natura Boni*(ca.404) and *Enchiridion*(ca.422), the doctrine is strengthened and fully Christianized. "Evil is nothing but

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[24] See Journet, pp.29-30 where he states that "the Judeo-Christian revelation enables the definition of evil to be formulated and to display its content. The doctrine of the unmediated creation of the world from nothing by one omnipotent God does, in effect, dispel the illusion of the eternity of matter, the substantiality of evil and the conflict of two antagonistic first principles, one good, the other evil." He then cites the most important biblical sources of the doctrine: Genesis 7:1-2; II Macch.7:28; Wisdom 11:18; John 1:3; Acts 4:24; Romans 11:36; 1 Cor.8:6; Col.1:15-17.

[25] See Journet, pp.30-32.

[26] Henri Marrou, "The Fallen Angel", transl. Hester Whitlock in Satan (London: Sheed and Ward,1951), p.79.

the privation of good (...indeed, it has no being)," Augustine states in his *Confessions* (Bk.III,ch.vii,no.12), and in the *Enchiridion* he asserts that "when...a thing is corrupted, its corruption is an evil because it is, by just so much, a privation of the good." (Ch.IV,no.12) "Evils have their source in the good," he claims, "and unless they are parasitic on something good, they are not anything at all." (Ch.IV,no.14)[27] Drawing from the earlier writers, Augustine consolidated their thought and bequeathed a legacy of philosophy and theology to the western world that persists even today, and that virtually dominated medieval thought.

The Middle Ages held to the doctrine of evil as privation. It was continually asserted and occasionally amplified by Christian thinkers for an entire millennium, from Boethius (in *Consolation of Philosophy*, IV,ii) and Pseudo-Dionysius to St. Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas.[28] Having received it, Aquinas exhaustively explored the doctrine and formulated it so precisely and finally that, as Charlotte Spivack suggests, "it faded as an explicit object of formal polemic and became instead an a

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[27] Augustine, Confessions and Enchiridion, transl. Albert C. Outler, volume VII of The Library of Christian Classics, John Baillie et al. eds. (London: SCM Press,1955). In the *Confessions* the doctrine is briefly mentioned in Book III, chapter vii, #12 and discussed at some length in Book VII, chapter xii, #18. It makes a meagre appearance in the *City of God*, XI,17 and XII,7-9, but is fully considered in both *De Natura Boni* and the *Enchiridion*, chapter III, #11 through chapter IV, #15.

[28] It is considered by Anselm in *De Casu Diaboli* and by Aquinas most concentratedly in the *Summa Theologica*, part I, questions 48 and 49; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III; and in *De Malo*.

priori assumption in Christian metaphysics."[29] It appears over 300 years later, for instance, in Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*. Underlying his discussion of the natural law in Book One like a felt presence (or like an a priori assumption), the doctrine informs Hooker's understanding of both nature and the unnatural, of good and evil. As Peter Munz suggests, for Hooker "evil, by implication, is privation,"[30] and E.M.W. Tillyard assures us that Hooker "[mediated] theology to the general educated public of his day," and thus "[spoke] for the educated nucleus that dictated the current beliefs of the Elizabethan Age."[31] By the time the doctrine reached Shakespeare it possessed quiet strength and unquestioned authority.

To understand what is meant by saying that 'evil is privation', one must understand the three fundamental ideas that form the doctrine. The basic premise is the belief that God created *ex nihilo*, and that because God is all good, all of creation is good. Augustine writes that "the Supreme Good beyond all others is God," and that "all good things throughout the ranks of being...can derive their being only from God. Every natural being, so far as it is such, is

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[29] Charlotte Spivack, The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage (London: Associated University Presses, 1978), p.21.
[30] Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol.4, p.64.
[31] E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (Chatto and Windus, 1943; rpt., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.21.

good."[32] This understanding of creation is familiar, but what it implies, of course, is that evil is *not* part of creation. It is an aberration of creation, a privation of the goodness that *is* creation. Again Augustine asserts that "no nature is evil so far as it is naturally existent. Nothing is evil in anything save a diminishing of good."[33] Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, elaborates:

> ...good is everything that is desirable. Well then, since each real thing tends to its own existence and completion, we have to say that this fulfills the meaning of good in every case. Therefore evil cannot signify a certain existing being, or a real shaping or positive kind of thing. Consequently, we are left to infer that it signifies a certain absence of good. That is why Dionysius calls it neither an existent nor a good, for since being as such is good, the taking away of one or of the other amounts to the same.[34]

If evil is simply the absence or privation of good, and has no created existence or positive force of its own, then it can exist at all only in relation to - in fact *in* - a good. What reality it has comes only from the being or good of which it is the privation. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas states quite bluntly that "evil cannot exist by itself, since it has no essence....Therefore evil needs to be in some subject, [and] every subject, as it is a

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[32] St. Augustine, De Natura Boni in Augustine: Earlier Writings, transl. John H.S. Burleigh, vol.6 of The Library of Christian Classics, John Baillie et.al. eds. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press,1953),p.326.
[33] Augustine,pp.330-31.
[34] St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, transl. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (London: Blackfriars,1967),part 1,qu.48,art.1.

substance, is a good."[35] This intrinsic connection between evil and good, between privation and the deprived, is made clear by Journet:

> There is no privation without a deprived being....There is no evil without some good to support it. Pure evil, evil in its own right, is impossible.[36]

This is the fundamental statement of the doctrine of evil as privation: "Pure evil, evil in its own right, is impossible." Evil exists only to the extent that it destroys good and thereby draws into itself the being or essence of what it consumes. This makes it easy to understand that the analogy often used to describe how evil works, according to the doctrine, is of the disease or cancer that corrupts the healthy body,[37] and it is hard to avoid recalling attention here to the images of parasitic disease in *King Lear*.

According to the doctrine it is clear that evil is non-being. Charlotte Spivack provides a succinct presentation of this fundamental idea:

> According to Origen, evil has no reality but is defined precisely as the diminution or privation of reality. Evil has no essential being but exists only negatively, like darkness, which is in reality nothing but the absence of light. In short, evil is non-Being. This concept of unsubstantial evil was

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[35] St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles(third book), transl. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne,1928),p.26. In the Summa Theologica Aquinas also states that "evil does not exist save as seated in a good." (part 1,qu.49,art.3).

[36] Journet,p.61.

[37] Consider, for example, Augustine's effort to elucidate the nature of evil as privation in his *De Natura Boni*: "Take festering, which men call specifically a festering of the body. Now if there is...something deep in the wound which it can consume the corruption grows as good is diminished."

> largely inspired by Plotinus, who had designated all Being as essentially good and attributed what seems to be evil to a lack of Being. He had suggested that what is considered to be evil in existence is merely the privation of full existence.[38]

Evil is non-being, but more so "what is considered to be evil in existence" is merely the privation of the essence of a thing, the essence being that which, when approached in the realization of existence, provides the fullness of that thing's existence - in short, its nature. This (i.e. Plotinus' and Origen's) understanding of evil as the privation of a thing's nature is shared by Aquinas:

> A thing becomes more intensified in conformity to its proper nature. Now as its form spells a certain achievement so does its privation spell a corresponding failure. Hence any form and perfection grows more intense by advancing towards a point of completion, while privation and evil come by retreating from it. That is why we do not speak of bad becoming worse by approaching some supreme evil in the same manner that we speak of good becoming better by approaching to the supreme good.[39]

Evil, then, is intrinsically involved with the nature or essential being of a thing. Aquinas suggests that it draws from, and frustrates or denies the realization of, a thing's potential (what a thing should be by virtue of its essence). The denial or diminution of a thing's proper nature or distinctive being is therefore evil, for such diminution tends toward non-being.

Considered more closely, the doctrine of evil as privation furnishes an understanding of nature as order, and

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[38] Charlotte Spivack, The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage (London: Associated University Presses, 1978), pp.14-15.

[39] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part 1,qu.49,art.3.

thus of evil or the unnatural as disorder. "All good things throughout the ranks of being, whether great or small, can derive their being only from God," states Augustine, and "every natural being, so far as it is such, is good."[40] That is, all of creation comes from and therefore participates in God, "the Supreme Good beyond all others",[41] and a creature's fullness of being - its nature - is actualized in this participation with God. This participation with God, this fullness of being, moreover, is understood by Augustine in terms of order:

> These three things, measure, form and order...are as it were generic good things to be found in all that God has created, whether spirit or body.... Where these three things are present in a high degree there are great goods. Where they are present in a low degree there are small goods....Where they are absent there is no natural thing at all.[42]

Being depends upon, and is in fact conditioned by, measure, form and order, and the tendency toward non-being is understood as a diminution of these three things. Aquinas follows Augustine in this matter, asserting that all of creation participates in God and that this participation is expressed in the measure, form and order of creation:

> St. Augustine writes of a trace of the Trinity being discoverable in every creature, for each is a definite thing shaped to a meaning and holding within itself a bearing on others. All this is implied in the three terms, number, weight and measure, put forward by *Wisdom*(11:21)....Equivalent

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[40] St. Augustine, De Natura Boni in Augustine: Earlier Writings, transl. John H.S. Burleigh, vol.6 of The Library of Christian Classics, John Baillie et.al. eds. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press,1953),p.326.
[41] Augustine, p.326.
[42] Augustine, p.327.

> terms are the three used by St. Augustine [in *De Natura Boni*], namely mode, species, and order [i.e. measure, form and order].[43]

The continuity of this teaching is manifested in Richard Hooker who also mentions the unity and uniqueness of God, whereupon "the being of all things dependeth," and suggests that in this ontological dependence upon God order ("constant Order and Law") is observed. Indeed order is the condition of this participation or dependance; God is the ground and depth of being,[44] and this being is conditioned by order. Hooker asserts that all things participate in this ontological fullness in terms of an order expressed in "Measure, Number and Weight" (which corresponds to Augustine and Aquinas' measure, order and form).[45] One sees that discussion of measure, form and order is a discussion of propriety and order in nature, and that in every creature there is a trace of the divine that is expressed precisely in this measure, form and order.

If being is nature, and *natural* means the realization of a thing's fullness of being as part of the order and propriety of creation, then *unnatural* means a frustration of the realization of a thing's fullness of being and thus is non-being, which is evil. For example, Hooker sees two degrees of goodness sought in the participation with God: one is fullness of being ("general perfection", "continuance

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[43] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part 1,qu.45,art.7.
[44] The "ground and depth of being" is a term used by the twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich to refer to, or define in some way the concept or reality of, God.
[45] Richard Hooker, Of The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book I, chapter ii, sections 2 and 3.

of being"), the other is that all things, "by affecting resemblance with God," covet "the constancy and excellency of those operations which belong unto their kind."[46] There is an unmistakable awareness of propriety in creation: like Augustine and Aquinas, Hooker feels that all creatures bear traces of the Trinity (participate in the ground and depth of being) and these traces determine the *proper* nature, the ontological character, of the creatures. Augustine suggests that the ape is a lesser form than man, but that does not mean that the ape is *bad*, for it possesses the measure, form and order proper and appropriate to its ontological nature or position in creation.[47] Consequently, as Augustine states, evil "is nothing but the corruption of natural measure, form and order. What is called an evil nature is a corrupt nature."[48] Indeed, "so long as [a thing (natura)] retains some measure, form and order there is still some good in it."[49] This measure, form and order, therefore, is the expression or condition of a thing's nature or essential being, and evil is the privation of that which is proper or natural to something. Thus Aquinas:

> ...an evil means the displacement of a good. Not that every absence of a good is bad, for it can be taken in a negative and in a privative sense. The mere negation of a good does not have the force of evil, otherwise it would follow that wholly non-existents were bad, also that a thing was bad because it did not possess the quality of something else, a man, for instance, who was not swift as a

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[46] Hooker, Book I, chap.5, sec.2.
[47] Augustine, p.330.
[48] Augustine, p.327.
[49] Augustine, p.329.

> mountain-goat or strong as a lion. The absence of good taken deprivatively is what we call evil, thus blindness which is the privation of sight.[50]
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> Since...evil is privative of good and not purely negative, not every absence of good is an evil, but only of that which a thing by nature can have and is expected to have. The lack of sight is an evil in an animal, but not in a stone which is not made to see.[51]

The doctrine is clear: evil is only the privation of a good which is due to anything by virtue of that thing's essential being or nature. That which is unnatural is evil.

The question now arises, for it is the question posed by *King Lear*: what is natural, and therefore the essence of being, in man? L.C. Knights briefly discusses the medieval understanding of order and suggests that "within this natural order man had a unique place. There was no question of his 'following Nature' in the vague nineteenth century sense,...but only of realizing the potentialities of his own nature:"

> It was 'natural' for him to sin, but his essential nature was fulfilled in doing what he ought to do: so that in another and more important sense 'natural' as applied to man tended to suggest a standard to be achieved, - that which was right and proper for man.[52]

Thus Hoooker mentions "our...intent of discovering the natural way," for "as everything naturally and necessarily doth desire the utmost good and greatest perfection whereof

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[50] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part 1,qu.48,art.3.
[51] Aquinas, part 1,qu.48,art.5. In the Third Book of his Summa Contra Gentiles, chapter vii, Aquinas again states that "evil...is nothing else but the privation of what is connatural and due to anyone."
[52] L.C. Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes (London: Chatto and Windus,1959),p.88.

Nature hath made it capable, even so man."[53] The peculiar quality of man's nature, though, is that he is, in the medieval and renaissance mind, a fusion of beast and angel. "The utmost good and greatest perfection whereof Nature hath made [man] capable," however, requires that he participate in his spiritual, and not solely in his bestial nature. Aquinas, for instance, is acutely aware of the dichotomy between man's true nature and the fullness of his being, and his bestial nature or partial and sub-human being, when he suggests that "what appears good to [men] as creatures of sense is simply not good for them as human."[54] As with all creatures, the trace of the divine in man is the expression of his participation in Being Itself,[55] and is thus his essential being - his nature. Again Aquinas provides the appropriate analysis:

> ...we take the comings forth of the divine Persons after the model of understanding and willing; the Son issues as the Logos of mind, and the Holy Ghost as the Love of will. So that in rational creatures, endowed with mind and will, we find a likeness of the Trinity in the manner of an image when they conceive an idea and love springs from it.[56]

Aquinas suggests that the trace of the divine in man - his proper measure, form and order - is seen in his capacity to reason and to love. This is his unique participation in God, his full and proper nature (or as L.C. Knights puts it, "that which [is] right and proper for man"). Those

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[53] Hooker, Book I,chap.8,sec.1.
[54] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part 1,qu.49,art.3.
[55] Paul Tillich refers to God as "Being Itself".
[56] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part 1,qu.45,art.7.

qualities, therefore, which make a human being fully human are reason *and* love.

These perceptions of ontological stability or order, and the question of man's nature and the full potential of his being, were expressed in medieval and renaissance iconography as a hierarchy of base and noble, brutish and divine which is later called the great chain of being. In his study of *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, Theodore Spencer states that:

> In the sixteenth century the combined elements of Aristotelianism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, and Christianity were almost indistinguishably woven into a pattern which was universally agreed upon, and which, in its main outlines, was the same as that of the Middle Ages. New ideas...were treated either as additions to the accepted picture, or as fresh ways of interpreting the one universal truth about which there was no question.... There was an eternal law, a general order - in the universe, in the ranks of created being, in the institution of government....[57]

The view that creation - nature - is essentially ordered (i.e. ordered in its essence) was, we are told, "universally agreed upon". E.M.W. Tillyard also claims that this view was

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[57] Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare and The Nature of Man, second edition (New York: MacMillan, 1949), p.1. Compare also the comments of L.C. Knights: "in the middle ages or in the sixteenth century.... it was taken for granted that Nature was often cruel...but the whole disposition of things, independent of man's will, served a providential plan. Nature, in this sense, though subject to disorder, was essentially ordered, and it was ordered for the good of man." (Some Shakespearean Themes, pp.86-7.)

common during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance,[58] and A.O. Lovejoy argues that medieval and renaissance Europe pictured this universal order, in part, as a chain - the chain of being:

> [There] was the conception of the plan and structure of the world which, through the Middle Ages and down to the late eighteenth century, many philosophers, most men of science, and, indeed, most educated men, were to accept without question - the conception of the universe as a "Great Chain of Being," composed of an immense, or...of an infinite, number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape non-existence, through "every possible" grade up to the ens perfectissimum - or, in a somewhat more orthodox version, to the highest possible kind of creature, between which and the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite - every one of them differing from that immediately above and that immediately below it by the "least possible" degree of difference.[59]

The metaphor gave expression to the belief, not only in the order of creation, but also in the precise placement of creatures in this chain of being *according to* this order in nature. That is, a link in the chain occupies its particular position in the chain because of its very nature. The concept of proper measure, form and order as the expression of what is natural is conveyed by this metaphor of the chain.

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[58] E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (Chatto and Windus, 1943; rpt., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.17.
[59] Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (1936; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p.59. R.C. Bald, on Ulysses' speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida*, I, iii, states that "the familiar concept of the great chain of being, which is at the basis of Ulysses' speech, determined the patterns of Shakespeare's thought." (R.C. Bald, *'Thou, Nature, Art My Goddess': Edmund and Renaissance Free Thought* in G. McManaway, et.al. eds., Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies (Washington: Folger Library, 1948), p.339.)

The metaphor asserts the *ontological* order and propriety of all creation, therefore, (it is, after all, the chain of *being*) and thus, presumably, expresses the attendant belief in the ontological uniqueness and propriety of each link in relation to the whole chain. As Hooker suggests, "we see the whole world and each part thereof so compacted, that as long as each thing performeth only that work which is natural unto it, it thereby preserveth both other things and also itself."[60] Hooker is speaking here of the realization of being and how such realization depends upon, because it is a part of, nature (the chain).[61] Nature is being, and the natural is the fulfillment of being.[62] Whatever is proper or natural to something is precisely that thing's essential being, which is expressed by its location in the chain.

The importance of understanding man's position in the chain is recognized and explained by Tillyard:

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[60] Hooker, Book I,chap.9,sec.1.

[61] John F. Danby suggests that according to the natural law of the Elizabethans, "each creature...under God was a self-maintaining 'this'. It was not part of a machine. Rather, it was an intelligence observing its rightful place in a community. What held it in place and held the community together was Reason. The law it observed was felt more as self-expression than as external restraint. It was a law, in any case, which the creature was most itself when it obeyed." (John F. Danby, Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of *King Lear* (London: Faber and Faber,1949),p.25.)

[62] "For the Elizabethans...Nature is an ordered and beautiful arrangement, to which we must adjust ourselves. Where we study Nature in order to exploit it, Bacon and Hooker study her in order to discover their duties. They think not of our controlling her but of allowing her to control us." (Danby, pp.20-21)

> In the chain of being the position of man was of paramount interest....He was the nodal point, and his double nature, though the source of internal conflict, had the unique function of binding together *all* creation, of bridging the greatest cosmic chasm, that between matter and spirit.[63]

Man's position in the chain of being draws attention again to his "double nature", to his participation in both "matter and spirit", and as Tillyard suggests, this double nature is the "source of internal conflict". If man is "the nodal point" in the chain, what is natural for him? How is his humanity - his being - most fully realized or expressed: in matter or in spirit; as beast or as angel? The opinion among most renaissance thinkers was fairly united, with a few notable exceptions:[64]

> ...it was generally clear enough what man should do if he were to follow the law that Nature, under God, had laid down for him. He must begin with the senses, for that is the condition of his being, but he must rise above them to find the truth. By the proper use of her faculties, through the right kind of love, says Castiglione's Cardinal Bembo, the soul 'ariseth to the noblest part of her (which is the understanding),' and then from her own and particular understanding she may rise to the 'universal understanding'; there the soul, at last finding her true home, 'fleeth to couple herself with the nature of Angels....'[65]

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[63] Tillyard, pp.73-4. Lovejoy also mentions the belief that man was a free creature "half material and half spiritual - the middle link in the Chain of Being." (p.103)

[64] The two most notable exceptions, of course, were Montaigne and Machiavelli, both of whom I shall discuss in the next chapter.

[65] Spencer, pp.13-14. Spencer's reference to Castiglione comes from the Fourth Book of Il Cortegiano (The Courtier): "And therfore burninge in this most happye flame, she [i.e. the soul] arryseth to the noblest part of her (which is the understanding) and there no more shadowed with the darke night of earthlye matters, seeth the heavenlye beawtye: but yet doeth she not for all that enjoye it altogether perfectlye, bicause she beehouldeth it onlye in her

"Through the right kind of love" man achieves the noble understanding that is proper to him. This blend of love and understanding equals or composes the fullness of his humanity, which is understood in spiritual terms. Man is to transcend the bestial and aspire to the spiritual in order to realize the fullness of his being. In the *Courtier's Academy*, Annibale Romei, commenting on man's position in the chain, also suggests that

> ...it is in our power, to live like a plant, living creature [sic] like a man, and lastly as an Angell: for if a man addict himself only to feeding and nourishment, hee becommeth a Plante, if to things sensuall, he is as a brute beast, if to things reasonable and civil he groweth a celestial creature: but if he exalt the beautiful gift of his mind, to thinges invisible and divine, hee transfourmeth himselfe into an Angel; and to conclude, becommeth the sonne of God.[66]

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, whom Romei is paraphrasing in the quotation above, has God say to Adam, and thus to all men, "Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lowest forms of life, which are animal; thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the

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[65](cont'd)perticular understandinge, which can not conceive the passing great universall beautye: wherupon not throughlye satisfied with this benifit, love giveth unto the soule a greater happines. For like as throughe the perticular beawtye of one bodye he guydeth her to the universall beawtye of all bodies: evenso in the last degree of perfection throughe perticular understandinge he guideth her to the universall understandinge. Thus the soule kindled in the most holye fire of true heavenlye love, fleeth to coople her selfe with the nature of Aungelles." (The Book of the Courtier, transl. Sir Thomas Hoby (1561; rpt. London: David Nutt, 1900), pp.359-60.) Baldassare Castiglione originally wrote Il Cortegiano in 1528.

[66] Annibale Romei, Courtier's Academy (1546; English translation, 1598), p.48 (chapter two, "Of Human Love").

higher forms of life, which are divine."[67] It is clearly felt that man's nature is most *fully* realized in his participation in spirit as opposed to matter, and that he "degenerates" into the bestial: "man's nature is not a minimum to which man can be reduced;...it is rather a maximum which man must attain."[68] In terms of the great chain of being, then, man's nature most fully corresponds to his link with the spiritual rather than the animal, and is most fully realized in his aspirations toward the top of the chain (i.e. God):

> ...the grand Nature is not only a series of positons....The whole system has orientation, too. Supervening on the local nature which derives from position, there is disposition (in our modern and derivative sense). It is axiomatic that one should look to the higher. Nature has a nisus towards the topmost point of the pyramid.... This nisus is not what men invariably do have. It is what they inevitably should have. One's nature will be lost in default of not having it: one will slide from one's position. One's nature.... is an absolute shape to be realized.[69]

If the fullness of being (or nature) is expressed - through the metaphor of the chain - as the movement or aspiration towards God, which is reasonable since God is the source of all being, then the movement away from God (for

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[67] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Oratio de Hominis Dignitate, transl. Elizabeth L. Forbes, Journal of the History of Ideas, III(1942), p.348. The Oratio was originally published in 1486 and became a popular document of the age. (cf. the article on Pico in the The Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

[68] Danby, p.28.

[69] Danby, p.33. Later in his book Danby also suggests that the highest point in the hierarchy of being to which man can attain is "to be regarded as his highest and therefore his most real self."(p.169)

man the descent into the bestial) is a movement toward non-being, which is evil according to the doctrine of privation. For man, the bestial is only partial - it is less than full - and is therefore a privation. It is evil, not in itself, but because it is not more. On this fundamental quality of moral evil as the violation of being, Sir John Hayward (1564?-1627), in *David's Tears*, states that

> ...of all the creatures under heaven, which have received being from God, none degenerate, none forsake their naturall dignitie and being, but onely man; Onely man, abandoning the dignitie of his proper nature, is changed like Proteus, into divers formes....so man transformethe himself into that beast, to whose sensualitie he principallie declines.[70]

The bestial is, for man, unnatural, and is thus evil. It is a contradiction - a privation - of his being, and so of his goodness (for all being is good). The moral significance of ontological violation, therefore, is implicit in the concept of the great chain of being:

> The concept of the Chain had...become a moral as well as a physical frame of reference. Because God at the top represented complete Being or goodness, it followed that the lowest orders of nature, those farthest removed from God, possessed not only the least Being but also the least goodness. Location on the scale was therefore qualitative: an angel is better than a beast because an angel has more Being than a beast.[71]

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[70] Sir John Hayward, David's Tears (London: John Bull, 1623), pp.251-2.

[71] Charlotte Spivack, Comedy of Evil..., p.22. Cf. part of the entry for *Evil, The Problem of* in A Dictionary of Christian Theology, Alan Richardson, ed. (London: SCM Press, 1969): "God is ens realissimum, the source of all perfection; below him in the Great Chain of Being there stretch orders of being each less perfect and therefore less real than the one above it....As God is absolute reality and absolute perfection, so at the other end of the Chain evil

Moral evil is a condition or manifestation of ontological violation: the fullness of a thing's being is its greatest goodness - its created essence - and any privation of this being is evil. In man's case evil - the privation of good - is bestial.[72]

The intellectual tradition that Shakespeare inherited taught that what is unnatural for man is, in fact, a privation of being and is thus evil. This evil - this unnatural condition - was understood as a falling away from full being into partial being, a degeneration from man into beast. The conception of the unnatural or evil in man as bestial, and of this bestiality as an expression of the tendency toward non-being, is of course important if one considers the extensive bestial imagery in *King Lear* as an expression of evil as privation. The tradition that Shakespeare inherited also taught that "the idea of

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[71](cont'd)is absolute imperfection and therefore absolutely non-existent. Various stages of perfection correspond to their equivalent degrees of being. Evil is nothing in itself; it represents only an absence of good."

[72] Spivack, drawing in part from Lovejoy, mentions that the traditional depiction of Satan as a beast is, in fact, linked to this idea: "it was neither primitivism nor a fascination for the grotesque that led to the typical depiction of the devil as a beast. Satan conventionally appeared with animalized features - horns, tail, shaggy hair - embodying the animal passions and appetites that characterize the bestial aspect of privative evil associated with the lower orders on the Chain of Being." (Spivack, p.23)

Nature...is always something normative in human beings,"[73] and that this norm - this law of nature - is seen in man's capacity to reason and to love. Love and reason, that is, are the traces of the divine in man that make human beings fully human. It is also important, then, to know that love, no less than reason and probably more so, is essential to the realization of humanity,[74] for the examination of human nature in *King Lear* most specifically concentrates on this human attribute of love. *Lear* reveals that the fullness of human nature is in large measure realized in the quality of human love, and that the privation of this love is the condition of evil that consumes and draws away from goodness, and tends toward non-being.

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[73] Danby, p.21.

[74] In 1603 Sir John Hayward wrote that "God in the creation of man, imprinted certaine rules within his soule, to direct him in all the actions of his life: which rules, because we tooke them when we tooke our beeing, are commonly called the primarie lawe of Nature: of which sort the canons accompt [sic] these precepts following. To worship god: to obey parents and governours, and thereby to conserve common society: lawful conjunction of man and woman: succession of children: education of children: acquisition of things which pertaine to no man: equall libertie of all: to communicate commodities: to repell force: to hurt no man: and generally, to do to another as he would be done unto...." (Sir John Hayward, An Answer to the First Part of a Certaine Conference, Concerning Succession (London: Simon Waterson,1603), pp.A3(v)-A4.) An analysis of Donne's *Ecstasy* also reveals that man's quest to understand who he is is only resolved by the achievement of the proper or natural balance, for man, between the spiritual and the material, and that this resolution is *only* achieved through love. Love achieves man's fullness of being; in love, or through love, man learns who he is. (cf. Tillyard, pp.85-6)

III. ONTOLOGICAL VIOLATION IN *KING LEAR*

It should be clear by now that, according to the doctrine, the question or problem of evil is fundamentally an ontological problem: a question of the nature of being. The drama of *King Lear*, as it explores the nature of evil, also moves in this realm of ontology and confronts a basic question of existence: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?"; as it explores the nature of evil it explores the nature of the human being. It attempts to discover what is natural and what is unnatural for man, and reveals that the unnatural is, in fact, evil, and that evil is the privation of the fullness of the human being.

I

There seems to be little or no question that Shakespeare was concerned with nature and the natural, or perhaps more precisely with the nature of nature and the natural when he wrote *King Lear*,[75]

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[75] R.C. Bald notes that "'Nature' and its derivatives...occur more frequently in this play than in any other play of Shakespeare"(Bald, p.339), and Theodore Spencer elaborates: "Shakespeare uses the word 'unnatural' 37 times in all his plays; one fifth of these uses is in *King Lear*. It is also interesting to note, from a study of the Concordance, that the word 'nature' is used a great deal more in the plays written between 1601 and 1608 than in any

and it seems equally clear that his exploration of this problem was conducted within the confines of the intellectual background that he inherited. The concept of the inter-relatedness of all levels of being conveyed by the metaphor of the chain of being, for instance, is crucial to Shakespeare's examination of nature. It is the question of balance in creation, of the proper measure, form and order throughout the ranks of being, that is examined. When Lear invokes his memorable curse on Goneril in Act I, scene iv ('Hear, Nature, hear...'), he addresses a nature which he clearly conceives of as some kind of moral or ethical order. He curses Goneril because he believes she has violated nature which he sees as fully realized not only in a proper disposition of physical or material creation, but also in a proper disposition of human morality - a particular code of behavior. On the heath, as well, his view of nature involves moral considerations:

> Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
> Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
> I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness;
> I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
> You owe me no subscription: then let fall
> Your horrible pleasure; here I stand, your slave,
> A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man.
> But yet I call you servile ministers,
> That will with two pernicious daughters join
> Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
> So old and white as this. O, ho! 'tis foul.
> (III,ii,14-24)[76]

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[75](cont'd)others - 40 per cent of the uses occur in 22 per cent of the plays. It occurs most frequently in *King Lear*: 40 times."(Spencer, p.142,fn.#8)

[76] This basic assumption underlies Lear's thought as revealed in his speech at III,ii,49-59 as well:

Lear perceives the storm as unnatural only when it is linked, in his mind, to the behavior of his "two pernicious daughters". Nature, then, is not only a physical equilibrium, but also and more so the equilibrium - the proper measure, form and order - of moral forces. It is in this sense that one speaks of the nature of man, and in the play the disturbance of this moral dimension involves, and is reflected in, the disturbance of the physical world as well. What Lear perceives in the above quotation as nature co-operating with his daughters is simply the disorder in physical nature that attends the disorder in moral nature. To Shakespeare, and indeed in terms of the intellectual tradition he inherited, both the moral and the physical dimensions were inseparable components of the total order that composed creation, and thus were intrinsically related to and interdependent upon each other.[77]

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[76](cont'd)

...Let the great Gods,
That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
Unwhipp'd of Justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjur'd, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous; caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practis'd on man's life; close pent-up guilts
Rive your concealing continents, and cry
These dreadful summoners grace.

[77] In particular one recalls Hooker's famous passage in Book I, chapter 3, section 2 of his *Ecclesiastical Polity* on the fear of chaos, a passage which elaborates the belief in the inter-relatedness of all creation. Ulysses' speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida*(I,iii,75ff.) also shows how events and behavior in the affairs of man are an intrinsic part of the total order of creation; that the physical and moral dimensions of existence are parts of a single order. To

Violation in one meant violation in the other; disturbance in either was disturbance in the whole. If the measure, form and order of creation - or nature - were disturbed in any way, they were disturbed throughout, for nature was a unity.[78]

So in *King Lear* when the moral universe is disturbed the physical universe is also disturbed. As Act III, scene ii opens, Lear is "contending with the fretful elements" (III,i) and bidding them to consume and destroy nature, to "crack Nature's moulds...that makes ingrateful man". This ingratitude is so unnatural that nature can only destroy itself to expunge it. Lear's understanding of nature and the natural is entirely bound up with moral considerations: from the simple moral violation comes the violation of the entirety of nature, and this violation is so total that purgation can only come through destruction. The Gentleman

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[77](cont'd)repeat R.C. Bald, moreover, "the familiar concept of the great chain of being, which is at the basis of Ulysses' speech, determined the patterns of Shakespeare's thought;" "the thought of Ulysses' speech is at the very foundation of Shakespeare's feeling about nature and society."(Bald, pp.339 and 349.)

[78] Theodore Spencer suggests that Lear and Lear's experience are throughout the play presented as a microcosm that reflects and is in some intimate way bound up with the macrocosm; that what happens to Lear affects the other hierarchies of nature. (pp.139-40) He then goes on to state that "re-inforcement through expansion, expansion through re-inforcement, in the worlds of nature, of the individual and of the state, each inseparably linked to the others so that when one falls, they all fall - such is Shakespeare's technique in *King Lear*. It is a technique that would have been impossible without the picture of man's nature and the conflict it included that was taken for granted in Shakespeare's intellectual and emotional background." (Spencer, pp.141-2)

in Act III, scene i states that Lear

> Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
> Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
> That things might change or cease. (III,i,5-7)

These lines recall part of the great speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida*. Take away the "prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels," Ulysses claims, and "the bounded waters/ Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores/ And make a sop of all this solid globe."(I,iii,111-13) They also recall Hooker's comments on the natural law in the *Ecclesiastical Polity*, when he states that God "gave his decree unto the sea, that the waters should not pass his commandment."[79] Disturbance in the moral order of nature involves the whole of creation and inevitably results in a disturbance of the physical order as well. "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us," Gloucester tells Edmund:

> ...though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourg'd by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide,...and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. (I,iii,100-106)

Although he has cause and effect backwards, Gloucester, too, is aware of the wholeness of nature. Aberrations in the physical order of the universe are expressions of and are part of aberrations in the moral order. Despite the fact that he may be superstitious or trying to evade moral responsibility (or both), he nonetheless presents the vision of wholeness shared by Lear (and Ulysses in *Troilus and*

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[79] Book I, chap.3, sec.2.

Cressida).[80] He is, if you like, one of L.C. Knights' "voices".[81] As also with Lear, such a vision or awareness implies a conception of nature as a kind of norm, both physical and moral, that can be violated: "Nature finds itself scourg'd....Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide."[82] The disturbance of the physical norm in *King Lear* is a condition of the violation of the moral norm.

What is the moral norm, then? What in fact is natural for man? An important development in renaissance thought must, at this point, be mentioned because of its considerable impact on Elizabethan tragedy, and in particular *King Lear*. John Danby states that "there was a current doubt in Shakespeare's time as to what Nature really

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[80] Cf. Robert B. Heilman, "The Two Natures in *King Lear*" in Accent, vol.8, 1947-8: "Gloucester also stands for the order of the whole: he sees a relationship between all aspects of the universe."(p.57)

[81] Knights suggests that in the experience of *King Lear* we are in part "caught up in a great and almost impersonal poem in which we hear certain *voices* which echo and counterpoint each other; and all that they say is part of the tormented consciousnes of Lear; and the consciousness of Lear is part of the consciousness of human kind." L.C. Knights, "*King Lear* and the Great Tragedies" in Boris Ford, ed. The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Volume Two: The Age of Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p.233.

[82] Heilman suggests that in *King Lear* "there is ...bound up in the word [i.e. nature] a suggestion of norm, of wholeness, of a desirable and permanent order of things. That is, *nature* is not merely any given state of affairs in life, but a regular disposition, an informing principle with which, indeed, any given state of affairs may not be in harmony." (Robert B. Heilman, "The Two Natures in *King Lear*" in Accent, vol.8,1947-48, p.53) Note also that in Act III, scene vii, when his eyes are being put out, Gloucester cries, "Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature/ To quit this horrid act" (11.84-5), again presenting the conception of nature as some kind of order that has been violated by the acts being done.

was like."[83] What this doubt was and meant is explained by L.C. Knights:

> ...in the age of Shakespeare the partial erosion of the established assumptions about Nature [seems] to have had a share in the undermining of the older conception of human nature and the traditional sanctions of morality. By the beginning of the seventeenth century to some minds Nature was ceasing to appear as a divinely ordained order and was beginning to appear as an amoral collection of forces. Now if man himself is *only* part of Nature as thus conceived, then 'natural impulse' (or so it may be argued) cannot be questioned....[84]

Augustine, Aquinas and Hooker were being contested by the new thinkers - especially Montaigne and Machiavelli - in the same way that the old order and conventions of Lear and Gloucester are being challenged and forced out by Edmund, Goneril and Regan. *King Lear* becomes the world in which this "natural impulse", this "amoral collection of forces", begins to act and conflict with the old "divinely ordained order". The intellectual turmoil of Elizabethan England is reflected in the dramatic turmoil of *King Lear*, and the questions in the play echo the questions of the age: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?"

"The split in the concept of nature is to be found as early as the pre-Socratics, for they distinguished between nomos - nature as law - and physis - nature as vital force,"[85] and in the Renaissance the awareness of this split is most acute in the thought of Montaigne and Machiavelli.

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[83] Danby, p.35.
[84] L.C. Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes, p.88.
[85] Robert J. Bauer, "Despite of Mine Own Nature: Edmund and the Orders, Cosmic and Moral" in Texas Studies in Literature and Language, vol.X,1968, p.360.

Montaigne argued that "laws originate not in nature itself but rather 'take their authoritie from possession and custome'", that they "are based on arbitrary convention rather than on some unknown, immutable essence."[86] Thus Edmund's "plague of custom"(I,ii) contrasts with the ontological stability of the medieval measure, form and order. As a result of his convictions, Montaigne "had said that there was no real difference between man and the other animals, and he thereby knocked man out of his crucial position in the natural hierarchy."[87] Machiavelli, for his part, also felt that

> ...the real truth of things...had no connection with the elaborate structure of inter-related hierarchies or with the responsibility of man to the universe. For him the real truth of things concerned practical matters and particular necessities; it had no bearing on morals or ideals.[88]

Human nature, to Machiavelli, "is physis; it admits of no laws."[89] It is the "amoral collection of forces", the vital self-assertion of an Edmund or a Goneril, that is natural for man. "Even more cleanly than did Montaigne, Machiavelli severs from what man does any implication of what he ought to do."[90] Once again the medieval understanding of human nature is contradicted and defied.

Such is the nature of the conflict: it is the ambiguity of the term 'nature' that is set before us and examined in

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[86] Bauer, p.361.
[87] Spencer, p.38.
[88] Spencer, p.44.
[89] Bauer, p.363.
[90] Bauer,p.363.

the drama of *King Lear*, and it is toward a resolution of the ambiguity that the drama moves. Lear and Gloucester, we have seen, conceive of nature as a stable unity of moral and physical constants that have been established in the very essence of all created being. Nature, to them, is an ontological order that is realized in the measure, form and order proper to all creation and to each individual creature. Although the play is set in a pagan world, their view of nature "is neither pagan nor ancient British," but is the same as Hooker's and Bacon's. "Lear's nature, like theirs, is a structure ascending from primordial matter up to God,"[91] (i.e. the conception of the great chain of being). Their conception of nature as essential measure, form and order, however, is rejected by Edmund as mere "plague of custom." He is the representative of the new view of nature as pure vital force. Nonetheless, although this new or modern understanding of nature is represented in the play, "the orthodox and benignant view is also strongly represented. It is the view of those in the play who seem already to be slightly old fashioned."[92] Thus Kent, who is aware of an order or quality of being that is violated by the storm, naming this quality "nature" ("The tyranny of the open night's too rough/ For nature to endure." III,iv,2-3), and Albany, who shares the perception of a proper order in

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[91] Danby, p.28.
[92] Danby, p.21.

the moral universe.[93] Of all the characters in the play who are concerned with the question of nature, in fact, (and Regan and Goneril must be exempt from this category[94]) the great majority share the traditional view held by Lear and Gloucester. Perhaps, therefore, this view is the understanding of nature that Shakespeare means for us to draw from *King Lear*; perhaps this is the resolution of ambiguity towards which the drama moves.

What does this view have to say about what is natural *for man*? Because the play's examination of this question is conducted chiefly within the confines of an exploration of the filial relationship, we will begin there.

The "bond 'twixt son and father" that Gloucester speaks of as some kind of standard of the natural in human behavior(I,ii) is also referred to by Cordelia ("I love your Majesty/ According to my bond" I,i,91-2). Danby suggests that for Cordelia "'bond' means 'natural tie', a duty willingly accepted and gladly carried out because it answers to right instinct."[95] It is the expression of that which is natural to humanity - the natural bond of love and honour (in her case between father and child) - and it is surely in this sense that Gloucester refers to the "bond 'twixt son

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[93] Cf. IV,ii,46-50 ("If that the heavens do not their visible spirits/ Send quickly down to tame these vilde offences,/ It will come,/ Humanity must perforce prey on itself,/ Like monsters of the deep.") and IV,ii,78-80 ("This shows you are above,/ You justicers, that these our nether crimes/ So speedily can venge.").

[94] Heilman is correct when he states that "Goneril and Regan show no interest in the problem of nature." (Heilman, p.58)

[95] Danby, p.129.

and father" as well. Lear also mentions the filial bond as an expression of what is proper or natural to man, and briefly enumerates its qualities, when in Act II, scene iv he pathetically tells Regan:

> ...thou better know'st
> The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
> Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.
> (II,iv,175-77)

These are the qualities that express the fullness of human nature and are not simply the "plague of custom". Lear's view, Danby suggests, like Hooker's and Bacon's, "takes for granted that parents are to be honoured and human decencies observed. It assumes for the absolute shape for man an image of tenderness, comfort, generosity, charity, courtesy, gratitude."[96] His view, moreover, is shared by many or most of the characters of the play, those characters, Danby feels, "who are...unquestionably the most human."[97]

Edmund, at this point, would interrupt and cry foul. "The whole lot of you," he would say, "have been diseased by 'the plague of custom'. What is natural for man is what is natural to the animals, nothing more." Now Edmund's opinions, and the human behavior they beget, must be judged in terms of the play alone. It is clear that the play is replete with animal imagery, but this imagery is "used of only some of the characters, characters who are actually contrasted with others in whom there is no iota of

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[96] Danby, p.28.
[97] Danby, p.21.

bestiality."[98] It is applied to those characters who lack sympathy, tenderness, generosity and love, characters of the Edmund-Goneril group, whereas the characters who manifest these qualities, although they *are* sometimes imagistically linked to animals (for man *is* part animal), are not referred to as savage, predatory beasts, as are the Edmund-Goneril group persistently. The kindness of the good characters is made to compare, imagistically, with the ferocity of their predators. They are, in fact, men and women properly understood. There is a contrast, then, between those characters who are unnaturally bestial and those who are not, the implication being that the contrast also exists between those men and women who are human and those who are not. Edmund may feel that man is simply an animal, but the play itself - the imagery the dramatist himself employs - suggests that Edmund is wrong. As G. Wilson Knight suggests,

> [Edmund] obeys 'nature's' law of selfishness; he does not understand that it is in the nature of man to be unselfish, to love and serve his community, as surely as it is in the nature of the beast to glut his own immediate desire.[99]

The contrast between characters that the imagery of the play points to surely suggests that "unkindness is inhuman, and like the beasts....The animal world may have its own ways: but mankind, by nature, should be something other than the

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[98] Robert B. Heilman, This Great Stage: Image and Structure in *King Lear* (Louisiana State University Press, 1948), p.51. (A more detailed study of the animal imagery in the play follows later in this chapter.)

[99] G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire, 4th edition (London: Methuen, 1949), p.186.

beasts."[100]

The behavior of clearly half of the characters in *King Lear* is in contrast with the behavior of the Edmund-Goneril group. Kent, for example, refuses to abandon Lear even after the King has exiled him on penalty of death, and both he and the Fool follow Lear into the tempest. Gloucester, although his politic considerations initially restrain him, follows Lear into the storm as well, despite the fact that he too risks his life in doing so.[101] They are with Lear, suffering with him and risking their own lives for him, because they love him and wish to soothe him. And Edgar is there as well, the true son who is in time to guide and comfort a father who seeks his death. In Act III, scene iv they are all on the heath, drawn together in the storm because they love and wish to succour one another, well aware that to do so could mean death. It is through them, to borrow the words of L.C. Knights,

> ...that we come to see more clearly the sharp distinction between those whose wisdom is purely for themselves and those foolish ones...who recklessly take their stand on loyalties and sympathies that are quite outside the scope of any prudential

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[100] Knight, p.185.

[101] Cf. III,iv,145-50 (Gloucester is speaking to Lear):

> Go in with me. My duty cannot suffer
> T'obey in all your daughters' hard commands:
> Though their injunction be to bar my doors,
> And let this tyrannous night take hold upon you,
> Yet I have ventured to come seek you out
> And bring you where both fire and food is ready.

At III,iii,17-19, as well, Gloucester tells Edmund: "If I die for it, as no less is threatened me, the King, my old master, must be reliev'd."

calculus.[102]

Moreover, during and after the horror of Gloucester's blinding, Shakespeare gives us another vision of the same spirit that prompts the actions of the Fool, Kent, Gloucester and Edgar. A mere servant is outraged at the cruelty he is witnessing and sacrifices himself in his attempt to save Gloucester (III,vii,70-80), and shortly thereafter the remaining two servants comfort Gloucester and "fetch some flax and whites of eggs/ To apply to his bleeding face." He is then led by the Old Man to Edgar, again at risk of personal safety (IV,i,17), an old man who then goes off to seek for Edgar the "best 'parel" that he has, "come on't what will." There is also the compassionate "Gentleman" who, with Kent, searches for Lear (III,i) and later (if the same one) describes Cordelia's reaction to Lear's suffering (IV,iii,10-32). The play shows that the mean as well as the great display this capacity for compassion and sacrifice, which suggests something universal or natural to humanity. As Enid Welsford observes,

> ...in *King Lear* all the 'good' characters have one striking quality in common, they have the capacity for 'fellow-feeling' highly developed....Perfect and imperfect alike take for granted that the capacity for sympathetic love is a very valuable but quite normal attribute of human nature.[103]

The "bad" or evil characters, she then claims, "are the

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[102] L.C. Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes, p.110.
[103] Enid Welsford, The Fool: His Social and Literary History (Faber and Faber,1935; rpt.,Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith;1966), p.260.

exact opposite of the good in that they are abnormally devoid of 'fellow-feeling'." To be fully human is to *have* this quality, whereas its absence (deprivation) is incomplete being tending to non-being (evil). If man *is* noble, then his nobility is realized, quite simply, in the fullness of his being: his capacity for love and compassion, and the strength of courage that he draws therefrom, even in the midst of nightmarish brutality. This nobility, alongside horrible evil, is displayed in abundance in *King Lear* and is surely part of the vision Shakespeare is presenting of human nature.

If the qualities of love and compassion are the expression of what it means to be fully human, if the presence of these qualities in the play points to a humanity that transcends the bestial behavior and understanding of Edmund, then we have now come to the center of the ontological question of the human being that the play, in part, addresses. It is in the behavior of the good characters in the play, those banished and suffering men and women of compassion, that we see the essence of human being expressed. In Act III, scene iv Lear gazes upon the foul and punished nakedness of Edgar on the heath and asks, "Is man no more than this?" It is here and now that the deceptive appearances of the earlier Acts have been stripped away and Lear confronts naked - essential - humanity. The question he asks, therefore, is fraught with both significance and irony. It is significant because the consciousness of the

whole drama at this moment considers the essence of humanity; the ontological question of the nature of human nature with which the play is concerned is now asked.

The irony of Lear's question rests in the fact that he does not yet see the correct answer which surrounds him. All he sees is Edgar's filthiness and seeming bestiality and mistakes this for the fullness of humanity: "Is man no more than this? Consider him well...thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art."(III,iv,100-06). Lear asks his question in the circumstance of the heath and before the reality of Poor Tom, but he misunderstands both the circumstance and the reality. The heath is the location in the Lear universe which represents stark reality, the truth of things stripped down and laid bare. On the heath Lear confronts the essentials of being and is surrounding by the Fool, Kent and Gloucester; surrounded, that is, by human love, compassion and devotion. For his part Edgar, too, as Poor Tom, is continually associated with nature,[104]

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[104] Cf. II,iii,9-20:

> ..my face I'll grime with filth,
> Blanket my loins, elf all my hairs in knots,
> And with presented nakedness outface
> The winds and persecutions of the sky.
> The country gives me proof and precedent
> Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,
> Strike in their numb'd and mortified bare arms
> Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;
> And with this horrible object, from low farms,
> Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,
> Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,
> Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom!

and cf. also III,iv,125-36:

and although these associations seem ugly and vile (which Lear seizes on) they are simply the qualities of raw, unaccommodated nature. In Tom, the essence of human *nature* is revealed. In him, and in the others, we encounter essential humanity, and the audience is aware of the qualities that set these characters apart from the Goneril/Edmund group. The animal imagery of the play points, in fact, to *this* group as beasts, whereas Edgar and all those with Lear on the heath are understood to be far more than "poor, bare, forked animals." The scoured, brutal reality of the heath uncovers the nobility of man, the spiritual superiority of man over beast, that Lear has difficulty perceiving at this point. He seizes on Edgar's material poverty without yet realizing that this nakedness on the heath reveals the essence of humanity that transcends man's capacity as a creature of sense. Kent, the Fool, Lear, Gloucester and Edgar all participate in the nobility of man: that capacity for love and sympathy that *is* his superiority over the beasts and is, thus, the expression of the fullness of his being. And perhaps it is this fullness of being, this capacity for love, which is the 'ripeness' of human existence that Edgar insists upon ("Ripeness is all."

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[104](cont'd) **Gloucester**:What are you there? Your names?
Edgar:Poor Tom; that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the todpole, the wall-newt, and the water; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for sallets; swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle of the standing pool;...*mice and rats and such small deer,/ Have been Tom's food for seven long year.*"

V,ii,11).[105]

To learn the answer to his question, "Is man no more than this?", Lear must wait for his initial pain to subside and for his sustained suffering to rarefy his vision and bring the insight and wisdom of the later Acts. He becomes like Tom and is pricked and pinched by nature; he too becomes united with unaccommodated nature and learns from it.[106]

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[105] Enid Welsford claims that "it is, indeed,...the good who are normal. Lear, in his folly, is not reduced, as he fears, to the level of the beasts, but to essential naked humanity, 'unaccommodated man', 'the thing itself'. It is the evil who 'be-monster' themselves." (Welsford, p.270) On the nakedness theme in Acts II and III Harold Skulsky states: "If, then, as Edmund and Lear assume, a 'good' man's dignity and personality are a *persona* indeed, a mask over a void, then nakedness, physical and spiritual, will disclose the void; the dispossessed, madman or beggar, will reveal the essential cheapness beneath.... The notorious irony of the pantomime divestiture Lear performs in the course of the play is that a good man's nakedness, his animal and sensual being, is itself a kind of clothing.... Lear's own old age, madness and poverty are no closer to the truth about the king than the masquerades of Edgar, Kent and the Fool. These little seeming-substances, fragments of an atomized society, as they huddle together in the hovel or stumble toward the farmhouse in the downpour, are brightly etched as the saints of a holy community united in devotion to Lear. Humanity obstinately persists in being the wearer and not the garment." That is, humanity is something other than mere "animal or sensual being", which, Skulsky suggests, cannot be viewed as the essence but only as a kind of clothing. Nakedness does in fact reveal essential humanity, but this humanity must not be confused with animality; the nakedness does not reveal "the essential cheapness beneath", but rather, in stark, etched lines, the "saints of a holy community united in devotion to Lear." (Harold Skulsky, "*King Lear* and the Meaning of Chaos" in Shakespeare Quarterly, vol.XVII,1966, p.10)

[106] Cf. the stage directions at IV,vi,80 ("Enter *Lear*, fantastically dressed with wild flowers.") and Cordelia's lines at the opening of IV,iv:

> Alack 'tis he: why, he was met even now
> As mad as the vex'd sea; singing aloud;
> Crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,

The nakedness he suffers enables him to see into the essence of human kind, of which this nakedness is emblematic.[107] It enables him to see Cordelia - to understand her significance and value - and to return to her,[108] for Cordelia, more than anyone else in the play, represents the fullness of humanity, that which is natural and proper to man:

> The way is...prepared for the meeting with Cordelia, which takes up all the positive movements of the play and stamps them with the seal of a reality that is even more deeply grounded in the nature of things than the formidable selfishness Lear has discovered beneath conventional appearances.[109]

Lear has stumbled from ignorance through suffering and madness to achieve the rare insights of the later Acts and to discover what Knights considers to be "the most fundamental reality of all....the love and forgiveness of Cordelia,"[110] a reality that is "deeply grounded in the nature of things." In Act IV, scene iii, for instance, Cordelia's grief, like Edgar as Poor Tom, is associated with

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[106](cont'd)With hardocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn. (ll.1-6)

[107] G. Wilson Knight feels that in *King Lear* "we see humanity suffering", but more so we see that "mankind are... continually being ennobled by suffering. They bear it with an ever deeper insight into their own nature and the hidden purposes of existence." (Knight, pp.195 and 196)

[108] As D.G. James puts it, Lear, in Act IV, scene vii, "has stumbled his way through the storm from Goneril to [Cordelia]. This is what Shakespeare finally saw in his greatest play." (D.G. James, The Dream of Learning, 1951, p.124-5)

[109] L.C. Knights, "*King Lear* and the Great Tragedies", p.238.

[110] L.C. Knights, "*King Lear* and the Great Tragedies", p.237.

images of nature:[111]

> ...You have seen
> Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears
> Were like, a better way; those happy smilets
> That play'd on her ripe lip seem'd not to know
> What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence,
> As pearls from diamonds dropp'd. In brief,
> Sorrow would be a rarity most belov'd,
> If all could so become it. (IV,iii,17-24)

Again, in Act IV, scene iv, all of nature is seen to be somehow in sympathy with Cordelia; her association with nature is again emphasized:

> ...All bless'd secrets,
> All you unpublish'd virtues of the earth,
> Spring with my tears! be aidant and remediate
> In the good man's distress! Seek, seek for him,
> Lest his ungovern'd rage dissolve the life
> That wants the means to lead it. (IV,iv,15-20)

There is more to this passage, however, than simply the re-emphasis of Cordelia as natural, for it also suggests the quality of nature. This apostrophe to Nature balances Edmund's in Act I, scene ii and presents a radically different understanding of nature than his. Rather than an amoral collection of forces pitted against one another in brutal contest, nature is a collection of "aidant and remediate" virtues that soothe, heal and nourish.[112] Cordelia's role in the play, then, is that of the fullness of nature. She is fully associated with all that is natural, and this understanding of nature that the play presents is

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[111] Cf. Danby, p.134.
[112] Thus Cordelia's apostrophe also balances Lear's in Act I, scene iv where he curses Goneril with sterility and suffering.(11.273-287)

most fully realized in her. Addressing himself to the absent Lear, the Gentleman in Act IV, scene vi states that "thou hast one daughter,/ Who redeems nature from the general curse/ Which twain have brought her to."(11.202-04) Whether "twain" refers to Adam and Eve, as Danby suggests,[113] or to Regan and Goneril,[114] it is clear that Cordelia is understood as the equilibrating force of nature, and thus the standard of all that is natural. The unnatural is a curse upon nature, a violation of nature, which is overcome by her love and compassion, and in this love true nature is found and reaffirmed.

Cordelia, then, is what nature is and means in human existence. She presents the fullness and propriety of human nature, the essence of the human being. She represents "the opposite pole to the 'law of nature' to which Goneril and Regan abandon themselves," and as such she is understood to be "fully human".[115] Danby feels that "the Nature she stands for is essentially human" (i.e. that which rests in the essence of the human being), and Knights claims that "her love...represents an absolute of human experience that can

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[113] Cf.Danby, pp.124-5.

[114] There is evidence in the play to suggest Regan and Goneril at IV,vii,26-9 when Cordelia's words recall those spoken by the Gentleman in the previous scene:

> O my dear father! Restoration hang
> Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
> Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
> Have in thy reverence made!

[115] L.C. Knights, "*King Lear* and the Great Tragedies", pp.238 and 239.

stand against the full shock of disillusion."[116] On the reconciliation scene (IV,vii.42-75) Knights says that:

> ...we are aware that this still moment is surrounded by nothing less than the whole action of the play; and if questions that have been asked now await their answer, the painful knowledge that has been won will reject anything that swerves a hair's breadth from absolute integrity....It is in the light of everything else that has gone before that we recognize this [exchange between Cordelia and Lear] as a moment of truth.[117]

The question of human nature that rises from Lear's torment and echoes throughout the earlier Acts, "Is man no more than this?", is finally answered in Cordelia. "At the centre of the action is the complete endorsement of a particular quality of being," Knights asserts: "we may call it love."[118] This is the quality that makes man, ultimately, what he is.[119]

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[116] Danby, p.125; L.C. Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes, p.114.

[117] L.C. Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes, pp.115-16. Harold Skulsky also comments on the reconciliation scene: "Lear's intuition of the good in the course of this great scene is the refutation we have been awaiting....[Good] is an ultimate datum, an irreducible factor in human experience; like a color or a taste. Good is as visible as green, as John Donne says. And this simple cognition - call it the love of Cordelia or the dignity of man - is Lear's warranty for the meaningfulness of intrinsic value, and for its endurance in any conceivable creation." (Harold Skulsky, "*King Lear* and the Meaning of Chaos", Shakespeare Quarterly, vol.XVII,1966, p.14)

[118] Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes, p.118

[119] In terms of the metaphor of the chain of being, this ultimate expression of humanity is realized in man's movement towards God. Augmenting the noticeable parallels between Cordelia and Christ (the ultimate or ideal man), then, are the words she uses to reveal herself to Lear in the reconciliation scene - "And so I am, I am" (IV,vii,70) - which echo the words spoken during the theophany of the burning bush in *Exodus* when God names himself: "I Am." (3:14) When we say that Cordelia's love is that which makes man ultimately what he is, therefore, we sense the almost

King Lear exhibits nature and human nature as it was understood for centuries. All that Cordelia is and means in the play affirms the understanding of nature shared by Lear, Gloucester, Kent, the Fool and Edgar, and refutes the nature of Edmund, Goneril and Regan. Shakespeare's revelation in *King Lear* of what is natural for man is informed by the traditional medieval understanding shared by Augustine, Aquinas and Hooker.[120] There *are* absolutes in human existence which are the expression of the essence of the human being, the manifestation or trace of the divine in man that characterizes him as distinctly human and defines his nature. In *King Lear* human nature is fully revealed in Cordelia, and her love is the absolute of human experience that expresses the fullness of human being.

II

Evil is simply the violation of nature, the privation or absence of the fullness of being, and the evil in *King Lear* can be understood in precisely these terms. The evil of

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[119](cont'd)superhuman quality of this love. To Lear's assertion that she has some cause to hate him she replies, "No cause, no cause." If she means it - and we must accept that she does - it means she understands him so well that her understanding (fellow-feeling) transcends forgiveness (which implies judgement).

[120] Danby suggests that the "humanity embodied in Cordelia incorporates the traditional ideals of 'natural theology'." (p.125)

Edmund, Goneril and Regan is understood to be unnatural - it is a violation of nature - and these characters themselves are seen to be degenerate or deficient as human beings. They violate their human nature and thus suffer the absence or privation of the fullness of being.

One of the most notable features of the Lear universe is the prodigious and terrible disruption of nature. The clearest display and central metaphor of this disruption is, of course, the storm. As the daughters' callous treatment of Lear draws to a close at the end of Act II, the storm is heard at a distance (1.282). The following scenes that take place in the storm draw attention to the furious disorder into which the Lear universe has fallen. The storm rages with such violence throughout Act III that Kent comments on how extraordinary it is: "I never remember to have heard," he states, "such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,/ Such groans of roaring wind and rain;...man's nature cannot carry the affliction nor the fear." (III, ii,45-9) Later he again claims that "the tyranny of the open night's too rough/ For nature to endure." (III,iv,2-3) The storm is presented as a terrifying disruption of nature throughout this Act, and the chaos it signifies is underlined and paralleled by Lear's madness. "Contending with the fretful elements," he "tears his white hair/ Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,/ Catch in their fury, and make nothing of": "Blow winds and crack your cheeks," he cries, "rage! blow!/ You cataracts and

hurricanoes." (III,i,4-9; III,ii,1-2) The madness into which Lear descends is very closely associated with the storm; its chaos parallels the chaos in his mind:

> Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm
> Invades us to the skin: so 'tis to thee;
> But where the greater malady is fix'd
> The lesser is scarce felt. Thou'ldst shun a bear;
> But if thy flight lay toward the roaring sea,
> Thou'ldst meet the bear i'th'mouth. When the mind's free
> The body's delicate; this tempest in my mind
> Doth from my senses take all feeling else
> Save what beats there - filial ingratitude!
> (III,iv,6-14)

The violence of the storm "is scarce felt" by Lear because the "tempest in [his] mind" is the consequence of a greater, more violent disturbance of nature than these raging elements: his daughters' behavior. Although the storm *is* simply a storm, and thus a relatively ordinary force of nature, this particular storm is, nonetheless, a very exceptional display of nature's distemper, and its occurrence in the play at all, and especially so forcefully in the imagery of the play, implies that it does not simply *parallel* Lear's madness or inner turmoil but is actually part of the same disturbance of nature brought on by a disturbance in the world of *man's* nature. The storm is heard for the first time as the daughters finish with Lear in Act II: it, too, like Lear's madness, is seen to be the consequence of unnatural human behavior. "The breaking of the natural bond between himself and his daughters appears [to Lear] as a rent running through the whole of the

universe."[121]

All of nature is upset, therefore, by unnatural or evil acts in the affairs of men. Consonant with the traditional medieval understanding of the ordered unity of nature, *King Lear* presents a vision of the disturbance of all of nature that follows from the violation of the measure, form and order of any part of nature. R.C. Bald, for instance, cites Act I, scene iii.,11.103-15 from *Troilus and Cressida* [122] and suggests that:

> ...the lines quoted adumbrate nearly all the principle situations of [*King Lear*]. The prerogatives of age and of crowns are denied, and 'the bond cracked 'twixt son and father.' A world of chaos is produced: in Lear's mind, in all human relationships, and in the very elements as well. The storm is no mere symbol but, like 'these late eclipses in the son and moon', a symptom of the universal disharmony; macrocosm and microcosm interact on each other.[123]

This idea of the interrelation between moral nature and the greater ordered pattern, the measure, form and order of nature as a whole, is expressed in *King Lear* by Gloucester,

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[121] Wolfgang Clemen, The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery , second edition (London: Methuen,1977), p.147.

[122]

> ...How could communities,
> Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
> Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
> The primogenity and due of birth,
> Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
> But by degree stand in authentic place?
> Take but degree away, untune that string,
> And hark what discord follows. Each thing [meets]
> In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
> Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
> And make a sop of all this solid globe;
> Strength should be lord of imbecility,
> And the rude son should strike his father dead....

[123] Bald, p.339.

and as we have seen earlier in this chapter, his view is shared by many others as well:

> These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourg'd by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father: the King falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves. (I,ii,100-111)

Nature has been violated, and the moral disorder in *King Lear* is a very significant part of that violation. Indeed the disturbance of the natural order is most profoundly understood in terms of the disturbance of *human* nature; the experience of nature in chaos that pervades the play is fully understood only when one addresses, as Lear and Gloucester do, the question of *human* nature in chaos. Just as appalled by the behavior of their offspring as Kent is by the storm, the two fathers gaze into the rent in human nature that these offspring have produced, the rent that discloses the awesome and awful reality of evil, and they cry: "My son Edgar! Had he a hand to write this? a heart and brain to breed it in?" and "let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?"(I,ii,54-6; III,vi,74-6). These are the cries that the evil in *King Lear* has provoked, the tormented questions of men who are witnesses to, and victims of, a profound disorder in the nature of things.

The appalling awareness of evil in *King Lear*, then, is understood as an awareness of the unnatural. G. Wilson Knight suggests that "the evil of mankind is often here [i.e. in *King Lear*] regarded as essentially a defacing of 'nature', since this is now 'human nature', and human nature is moral."[124] Thus Gloucester, victimized by Edmund's deception, erroneously considers Edgar to be an "unnatural, detested, brutish villain"(I,ii,73), Kent asserts that "nature disclaims in [Oswald]"(II,ii,52), Lear calls his daughters "unnatural hags"(II,iv,276), and Gloucester refers to the behavior and activities of Goneril, Regan and Cornwall as "unnatural" dealings (III,iii,1). Indeed the word echoes throughout the play in constant association with the evil characters and their behavior, but at no time in the play are these individuals more fully described as being unnatural than when Albany castigates Goneril in Act IV, scene ii:

> O Goneril!
> You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
> Blows in your face. I fear your disposition:
> That nature, which contemns its origin,
> Cannot be border'd certain in itself;
> She that herself will sliver and disbranch
> From her material sap, perforce must wither
> And come to deadly use. (IV,ii,29-36)

Having finally understood how evil Goneril really is, Albany claims that she is a phenomenon separate from nature. He sees that she has violated her own nature, and that this violation is the very condition of her evil. As Enid

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[124] Knight, Wheel of Fire, p.184.

Welsford puts it, the evil characters in *King Lear* are seen to be "fundamentally abnormal and inhuman."[125]

Before accepting the claim that evil is unnatural, however, and fully considering the implications of this claim in a study of the nature of evil, one must, once again, come to terms with Edmund and *his* claims. He is the one serious challenge to the concepts of nature and evil that the play develops, and his views must be accounted for:

> Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
> My services are bound. Wherefore should I
> Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
> The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
> For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
> Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
> When my dimensions are as well compact,
> My mind as generous, and my shape as true
> As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
> With base? with baseness? bastardy? base,base?
> Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
> More composition and fierce quality
> Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
> Go to th'creating a whole tribe of fops,
> Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well then,
> Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.... (I,ii,1-16)

It cannot be denied that Edmund is one of the evil figures of *King Lear*, but in this speech he argues that the evil he is about to do is not unnatural at all, but answers to the 'law' of nature. If one considers Edmund's reasoning closely, however, one sees that it actually reveals his evil as the *denial* of nature. It must never be forgotten that Edmund represents the new philosophy of Montaigne and Machiavelli which denied the traditional beliefs of medieval

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[125] Welsford, p.263. Theodore Spencer also suggests that "Goneril and Regan not only violate natural law by their behavior to their father, they also violate their proper functions as human beings."(p.143)

philosophy. As such his views also deny the traditional understanding of *nature* offered by these beliefs (and by the play) and his effort to re-define nature actually constitutes a *denial* of nature.[126] His reasoning reveals that his evil is the privation of being, for he denies, in fact he cannot see, the fullness of what it means to be human. Throughout this speech Edmund is obsessed with baseness, and with his own in particular: "Why bastard? Wherefore base?....Why brand they us/ With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?" Ironically, Edmund's conviction of his own value - indeed superiority - as a man

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[126] R.C. Bald discusses the fates of two French free thinkers of the early seventeenth century in his consideration of Edmund's soliloquy. Giulio-Cesare Vanini "was burnt at the stake for his impieties at Toulouse in 1619," and Theophile de Viau, "accused of denying any God but Nature," was "apprehended on account of his writings in 1623 and...sentenced in 1625 to perpetual banishment." Although *King Lear* was written nearly 20 years before the trials of these men, "Edmund's lines prove that some of the doctrines of the free-thinkers...were familiar enough in England just after the turn of the century for an allusion to them to be immediately comprehensible to an audience at the Globe....The dramatic effect of Edmund's soliloquy is arresting. The fortunes of Vanini and Theophile show that their tenets shocked and enraged the conventionally minded. Their opinions were regarded as heterodox and subversive....Edmund's words, therefore, which are spoken on the first occasion on which he is alone and has an opportunity to reveal himself to the audience, were deliberately intended to shock and startle. They proclaim him at once as an extreme and dangerous individualist. (Bald, pp.344-7)

John Danby concurs with Bald: "In contrast to Lear and Hooker, [Edmund] finds it quite easy to treat of metaphysics or of the internal and immutable in nature without rushing at once into natural theology. Or rather, his natural theology is in ironical opposition to Lear's. [He] worships a Goddess of whom neither Hooker nor Bacon would approve....No medieval devil ever bounced onto the stage with a more scandalous self-announcement."(Danby, pp.31-2)

rests on his evaluation of his physical endowments; it grows out of the sole consideration of his *baser* qualities as a man: "my dimensions are as well compact,/ My mind as generous, and my shape as true,/ As honest madam's issue."[127] He goes on to say that he has, "in the lusty stealth of nature," taken "*more* composition and fierce quality/ Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,/ Go to th'creating a whole tribe of fops." Nature to Edmund is animalistic prowess and animalistic drive, and the constant repetition of base and baseness in this speech evokes associations with the lower, physical levels that fall away beneath man in the great chain of being. His understanding of human nature is dominated by physical considerations, and the only time he approaches anything more is to dismiss it as "the plague of custom". Edmund, of course, is the neglected product of a moral violation, a violation of the very order of being which he has never known and which he cannot yet see nor understand. Later in the same scene he responds to Gloucester's speech on "these late eclipses in the sun and moon", and again the limitation of his understanding of nature is manifest:

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[127] One doubts that mind, to Edmund, means much more than intelligence - a matter of simple biology or physical endowment - and generous, to him, would not mean noble so much as simply abundant: he is boasting of his superior intelligence. The rest of his speech, and indeed most of his behavior in the play, denies the validity or even existence of anything more (i.e. the ideal, or the ethics which support the ideal, of nobility).

> This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars; as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforc'd obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. (I,ii,115-23)

Edmund's stubborn materialism has seized upon the superstition without penetrating beyond to the reality that this superstition understands and imperfectly conveys. He conceives of the sun, the moon and the stars simply as physical bodies moving through or occupying space: he cannot see them, as Gloucester sees them, as parts of a natural order that has been violated. Edmund cannot see that the heavenly bodies and the affairs of men are both parts of a single order, that moral nature and physical nature are equal components of the same order and answer to the same natural law. In rejecting Gloucester's superstition, then, Edmund has also rejected this more profound understanding of nature that the superstition implies, but that Edmund cannot see.

This ignorance, and it is shared by others in the play besides Edmund, produces a misunderstanding of man which actually denies the fullness of his being. Unable or unwilling to see man and nature in terms of anything more than physical substance and animal physiology, those suffering from this ignorance cannot see the full potential of the human being expressed, for instance, by his unique position in the chain of being *between* animal *and* spirit.

They cannot see the significance and the value, for instance, of Cordelia; they deny those qualities that make her fully human. This goodness to Edmund is weakness and folly (I,ii,176-81), and to Goneril it is "milk liver'd"(IV,ii,50), the spirit of "cowish terror"(IV,ii,12). The evil characters in *King Lear* perceive the good characters as fools and cannot understand the value of love and sympathy:[128] "wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile," Albany tells Goneril; "filths savour but themselves."(IV,ii,38-9) These characters cannot see that a

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[128] Enid Welsford discusses the theme in *King Lear* of the wisdom of folly and of how the world of self-advancement and brutal competition cannot understand the impulse in human affairs of love and human sympathy, dismissing those characters who display such qualities as fools.(The Fool: His Social and Literary History, pp.257-73) Throughout Act IV, scene ii, for example, Goneril continually refers to Albany as a fool or as foolish (eg. ll.28,37,54,58,61) simply because she, like Oswald at the beginning of the scene, cannot understand Albany's behavior (or words). That true wisdom and humanity - which comes from and is expressed in love and human symapathy - is often considered to be folly by the self-serving world is a truth of which the Fool is acutely aware:

> That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
> And follows but for form,
> Will pack when it begins to rain
> And leave thee in the storm.
> But I will tarry; the Fool will stay,
> And let the wise man fly:
> The knave turns Fool that runs away;
> The Fool no knave, perdy. (II,iv,75-82)

In the first scene of Act III, as well, Kent asks the Gentleman if there is anyone with Lear in the storm and is told, "none but the Fool"(l.16), and Lear himself, after he has achieved his hard-won wisdom and learns the true meaning and value of love, tells Cordelia in the reconciliation scene that he is "a very foolish fond old man;" that he is "old and foolish".(IV,vii,60,84)

The closest Goneril and Regan come to the experience or even understanding of love is in their physical lust for Edmund which eventually leads to murder and suicide.

man may gain his life by losing it, that the fullness of humanity is realized only in giving, and that this fullness is lost in the animalistic drive for self-gratification and self-advancement. Certainly reproduction and competition in nature are part of survival - unrestrained in *human* nature, however, they become the lechery and cruelty Lear sees in his vision of sinful man in the storm and which are embodied in Goneril and Regan's competition for Edmund. Man is supposed to rise above this unrestrained behavior of raw sex and ruthless competition for survival. Human survival depends upon interdependence and mutual caring. This same drive for reproduction and of competition makes for new life in animals as well as man, but man's realization of how to do it should lead him to *love*, not bestial rutting. Indeed it is only in love that the fullness of human being is realised. Evil is that which denies this fullness; it deprives man of this realization.[129]

Yet even Edmund cannot finally deny his nature; despite his fine reasonings he too eventually acknowledges the nature he has rejected. Mortally wounded in the final scene,

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[129] In his *Summa Theologica*(part 1, qu.48, art.1), Aquinas states that "good and evil are not constitutive differences except in the field of morals, where acts get their specific character from the end, the objective of will, on which morality depends. Since good has the character of end, so is it that good and evil are specific differences for morality - good of itself, evil as setting aside the due end." Now it is important to note that "due end, the debitum, in St. Thomas' moral theology does not imply a categoric imperative, duty for duty's sake, but an imperative that is hypothetical, *if the agent is to be fulfilled*."(emphasis mine) (Thomas Gilby, O.P., transl. Summa Theologica (London: Blackfriars,1967), fn.'m', p.110)

Edmund's egotistical pretensions are stripped away and, in the extremity of death, he finally experiences his essential humanity.[130] "I do forgive thee," he tells Edgar, and at the point of death he says: "I pant for life; some good I mean to do/ Despite of mine own nature."(V,iii,242-3) In this final moment Edmund acknowledges the reality of that which he has hitherto denied; he responds instinctively to the natural human impulse that most fully defines humanity: "some good I mean to do."[131] Enid Welsford speaks of the wisdom of the heart and the truth of love, and of "the unambiguous wisdom of the madman who sees the truth" - the same wisdom that Edmund had formerly dismissed as folly - and her comments on this wisdom and truth are very helpful in understanding Edmund's dying effort to do "some good":

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[130] The idea that at the hour of death the reality of who one is becomes unavoidably present was propounded, for example, by Montaigne: "In all the rest there may be some maske: either these sophisticall discourses of Philosophie are not in us but by countenance, or accidents that never touch us to the quick, give us alwaies leasure to keep our countenance setled. But when that last part of death, and of our selves comes to be acted, then no dissembling will availe, then is it high time to speake plaine English, and put off all vizards: then whatsoever the pot containeth must be shewne, be it good or bad, foule or cleane, wine or water.

> For then are sent true speeches from the heart,
> We are our selves, we leave to play a part.
> (Lucretius.III,57)"

- from Montaigne's essay "That We Should Not Judge of Our Happinesse, Untill After Our Death", John Florio's translation, 1603.

[131] Robert J. Bauer suggests that this dying declaration of Edmund "stands as credit to his ultimate integrity and responsibility. It is tantamount to a recantation of physis and a concession to nomos." (Bauer, p.365)

> That is decisive. It is decisive because so far from being an abnormal freakish judgement, it is the instinctive judgement of normal humanity raised to heroic stature; and therefore no amount of intellectual argument can prevent normal human beings from receiving and accepting it.[132]

And so Edmund dies, finally having received and accepted his humanity. This encounter with his humanity is provoked, moreover, by a description of Gloucester's suffering. "This speech of yours hath mov'd me," he tells Edgar, "and shall perchance do good." (V,iii,198-9) He is *moved* by Gloucester's suffering; he is feeling for his father. Despite his efforts to deny it, he now feels something which transcends his own efforts to understand or control, and he just responds - decisively - to this final experience of his humanity.

The fullness of humanity is realized in something more than the simply physical dimension of our nature. There is a potential to be realized that transcends the purely physical, and it is the denial or privation of this potential that draws man away from the fullness of his being into an impoverished or deprived state of only partial being, and this impoverishment or deprivation constitutes evil in his existence. Man is part animal, and for him to deny his bestial nature is supreme folly. But he is still only *partially* an animal; the *fullness* of his being also involves those qualities of being - the spiritual - that transcend the purely bestial. Man must surely not deny his

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[132] Welsford, p.270.

animal nature, for in doing so he violates his proper measure, form and order, but he must not deny the transcendent spiritual qualities of his being either, for to the extent that he denies *these* qualities he withdraws from the fullness of his being into partial being. Insofar as man's denial of his spiritual nature leads to the realization of only partial being, his progressive descent into the bestial is a privation, and is therefore evil. To be fully human is to be both animal *and* spirit. There is nothing evil about the beast in man per se, but only if it is unaccompanied by the fuller being of spiritual development. It is evil for man, not in itself, but because it is only partial, because it is not full.

As the evil characters in *King Lear* deny the fullness of their human nature, then, they become less human and descend the chain of being to the level of the beast, and this descent becomes the expression of their evil. Pico della Mirandola suggests that man has "the power to degenerate into the lowest forms of life, which are animal."[133] Thus Lear refers to Goneril's "deprav'd" quality (II,iv,134) and calls her a "degenerate bastard"(I,iv,251), and this idea of degeneration is repeated later in the play when Albany sees Goneril and Regan as "most degenerate" (IV, ii,43). In evil man degenerates, and as Pico suggests, he degenerates into a beast. Throughout *King Lear* there is an

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[133] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Oratio de Hominis Dignitate, trans. Elizabeth L. Forbes in Journal of the History of Ideas, III(1942), p.348.

abundance of bestial imagery associated with the evil characters. The "marble-hearted fiend" ingratitude, Lear claims, is "more hideous...than the sea-monster," thereupon calling Goneril a "detested kite".(I,iv,257-60) "With her nails/ She'll flay thy wolvish visage," Lear says of Regan to Goneril (I,iv,305-6), and late in the play Albany calls Lear's eldest "tigers, not daughters" and suggests that in them is cast an image of humanity that "preys on itself/ Like monsters of the deep." (IV,ii,40, 49-50) These exclamations are part of a massive imagistic pattern built up in the play that pictures Lear's daughters as violent beasts of prey. Again, just before his own eyes are plucked out, Gloucester tells Regan that he sent Lear to Dover

> ...Because I would not see
> Thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes;
> Nor thy fierce sister in his anointed flesh
> Rash boarish fangs. (III,vii,54-7)

Such imagery permeates the play and dominates much of its thought, in much the same way as the storm does. It is a pervasive comment on the evil and the evil characters in the play, suggesting that it, and they, are bestial.

The bestial imagery represents man's descent along the chain of being into the beast, a movement away from fullness of being towards non-being:

> God is <u>ens realissimum</u>, the source of all perfection; below him in the Great Chain of Being there stretch orders of being each less perfect and therefore less real than the one above it....As God is absolute reality and absolute perfection, so at the other end of the Chain evil is absolute

> imperfection and therefore absolutely non-existent.[134]

Many critics have noted this: Heilman feels that "in the animal imagery of *King Lear* we see man moving toward self-destruction, moving, that is, toward an animality that cancels his humanity,"[135] G. Wilson Knight that the two sisters, like Edmund, are "below humanity",[136] and R.C. Bald that "the incessant references to the lower animals and man's likeness to them....are there to enforce the truth that when men abrogate their humanity they sink to the level of brutes."[137] But the significance of this ubiquitous critical observation differs among critics. I feel that the significance of the bestial imagery to the play's statement on evil has, for the most part, been missed. Heilman, for example, makes the rather vague and grandiose statement that, "taken together, the storm and the animal imagery suggest that mankind is falling back into the beast."[138] The play *may* suggest something so cataclysmic, but perhaps it is simply exploring the existential or ontological quality of human existence itself - in every age and in every place. Thus the storm/animal imagery would merely be the dramatic shorthand (to borrow a term of H.D.F. Kitto's) to convey an understanding of aberration or evil in human existence. A.C. Bradley also has a theory: he stumbles onto the chiefly

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[134] Alan Richardson, ed. A Dictionary of Christian Theology (London: SCM Press, 1969), p.121.
[135] Heilman, "The Two Natures in *King Lear*", pp.51-2.
[136] Knight, Wheel of Fire, p.206.
[137] Bald, "'Thou, Nature, Art My Goddess'...", p.341.
[138] Heilman, "The Two Natures in *King Lear*", p.51.

Eastern idea of the transmigration of souls to explain the imagistic preoccupation of *King Lear*.[139] This seems to be quite far-fetched when one considers that an explanation from Christian theology was right at hand for Shakespeare, and one presumes as well that the Christian theological explanation - that man becomes a beast when he doesn't realize his full humanity - would have suited Shakespeare more. For his part G. Wilson Knight suggests that:

> Those daughters, and Edmund, are human beings, yet cruel as beasts that have no sense of sympathy. They are therefore throwbacks in the evolutionary process: they have not developed proper humanity. They are 'degenerate'.[140]

This, of course, is a good enough point, but the mention of the evolutionary process, while clever, is not a serious attempt to understand or to read *Shakespeare*: he lived long before Darwin. Perhaps Knight, and Bradley too, should have looked into Hooker, Bacon or Aquinas to find the ideological underpinnings of Shakespeare's tragedy: theirs were the ideas that were current and pervasive in Shakespeare's society.

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[139] A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, second edition (1905; rpt. London: MacMillan, 1964), p.267. On the following page Bradley elaborates his theory: "...he [Shakespeare] seems to be asking himself whether that which he loathes in man may not be due to some strange wrenching of [the] frame of things, through which the lower animal souls have found a lodgement in human forms, and there found - to the horror and confusion of the thinking mind - brains to forge, tongues to speak, and hands to act, enormities which no mere brute can conceive or execute. He shows us in *King Lear* these terrible forces bursting into monstrous life and flinging themselves upon...human beings...."

[140] Knight, Wheel of Fire, p.185.

If these thinkers and the tradition they represent *are* consulted, one finds a sophisticated yet accessible doctrine that explains the nature of the evil in *King Lear* and the way in which it is imagistically conveyed. If that which is proper (i.e. natural) to a creature is in some way or to any extent weakened, diminished or denied, then the created essence or fullness of that creature's being is also diminished. Hence, such privation - by violating being - is actually the movement or tendency towards non-being, and in terms of the metaphor of the great chain of being this privation is seen as a descent along the chain. In man's case, the descent shows him becoming *only* beast instead of both animal *and* spirit. Some critics can sense this doctrine behind the events and imagery of *King Lear* but do not clearly see it. Thus Heilman suggests that the imagery characteristic of the play explains "a deprivation as a product of man's yielding to the animal element in him,"[141] and A.C. Bradley feels that the anguished cries of Lear and Gloucester ask:[142]

> How can there be such men and women?....And, in particular, to what omission of elements which should be present in human nature, or, if there is no omission, to what distortion of these elements is it due that such beings as some of these come to exist?[143]

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[141] Heilman, This Great Stage, pp.97-8.
[142] That is, the cries at I,ii,54-6 ("My son Edgar! Had he a hand to write this? a heart and brain to breed it in?") and at III,vi,74-6 ("let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?").
[143] Bradley, p.264.

The doctrine teaches, as does the play, that the omitted element "which should be present in human nature" is love, and the absence or privation of this quality which man "by nature can have and is expected to have" defines the evil that Bradley's commentary touches upon.[144] It is the harsh reality and cruel mystery of evil that is being questioned in these cries, indeed in the whole play, and the explanation that the play provides, the answer to this question of evil it attempts to give, is informed by the doctrine of privation. As Enid Welsford suggests:

> ...love or 'fellow feeling' is a normal attribute of humanity, and as such it does not need proof, for it is its absence, not its presence, that requires explanation.[145]

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[144] Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part 1,qu.48,art.5 teaches that "evil is privative of good and not purely negative," and thus that "not every absence of good is an evil, but only of that which a thing by nature can have and is expected to have."

[145] Welsford, p.263

IV. THE LIMITATION OF EVIL IN *KING LEAR*

We now come to the final claim of the doctrine and the final claim of the play: that evil destroys itself. As evil grows it moves closer to nothing - closer, that is, to self-destruction - for if it totally consumes the good upon which it depends then it also destroys itself. Similarly, the evil characters in *King Lear* finally consume the particular good characters upon whom they and their evil have been preying, but *they* are also destroyed in the process.

Throughout *King Lear* there are clear indications that evil is not only destructive but also self-destructive. In the first scene of Act II, Curan asks Edmund if he has "heard of no likely wars toward, 'twixt the/ Dukes of Cornwall and Albany," and Edmund claims that he has heard "not a word". "You may do then, in time," the courtier ominously replies.(11.10-13) When speaking with the Gentleman in Act III, scene i, Kent also states that "there is division,/ Although as yet the face of it is cover'd/ With mutual cunning, 'twixt Albany and Cornwall"(19-21), and later in the same Act Gloucester tells Edmund that "there is division between the Dukes."(III,iii, 8-9) This division, moreover, is ominously anticipated in the opening lines of the play. Gloucester and Kent are discussing the political

division between Albany and Cornwall, as well as the moral division that separates Edgar and Edmund, and the juxtaposition of these two comparisons vaguely introduces the central tension or struggle of the entire play. On the one hand are Edmund and Cornwall, on the other hand Edgar and Albany. The folly of Lear and Gloucester precipitates a struggle between the two forces of human nature represented by these men - the one unnatural and evil, the other natural and good - and this struggle is therefore anticipated in the very first lines of the play. Into the unified kingdom is released, by folly, the disruptive and destructive force of evil. We are to learn as the play develops that the situation this force breeds - the volatile situation of brutal competition - is unstable, and that this state of instability cannot support the violent energies of evil for long. Eventually it collapses, destroying in its collapse the evil that had created it. Thus this evil, immediately upon receiving the gift that has granted it existence and power, begins to consume itself. The fact that the evil characters are separate individuals is somewhat ancillary to the fact that together they constitute the evil in the play. In terms of the dramatic construct of the play as a whole, they represent evil, and the enmity or division among them represents the perverse quality of evil as self-consumptive.

This division creates a weakness that invites upon itself destruction from without, moreover, a fact of which Kent is very much aware: there are servants of the dukes, he

tells the Gentleman in III,i, "which are to France the spies and speculations/ Intelligent of our state," and

> What hath been seen,
> Either in snuffs and packings of the Dukes,
> Or the hard rein which both of them have borne
> Against the old kind king; or something deeper,
> Whereof perchance these are but furnishings-
> But, true it is, from France there comes a power
> Into this scatter'd kingdom; who already,
> Wise in our negligence, have secret feet
> In some of our best ports.... (III,i,23-33)

The division in the "scatter'd kingdom" has created a weakness in England that invites the power from France to test it. Kent even suggests that there may be "something deeper", a greater division or corruption, "whereof perchance these [snuffs and packings of the Dukes] are but furnishings." The division in the kingdom and the presence of the French army ominously suggest a serious corruption or decay in England; the situation of cruel and violent competition has weakened or diseased the once healthy state; the evil has begun to consume the good, and thereby has begun also to consume itself.

The self-destructive nature of evil in the play is not limited to the political evil that corrupts the state, however, for, as an individual, Cornwall is also destroyed by his own evil. Driven by his ambition, Cornwall, with Lear's two eldest daughters, means to destroy Lear and those who are aiding him. When he learns of Gloucester's "treason", therefore, he visits the crime with punishment. But the punishment executed upon the old man is so sadistic

that it provokes one of Cornwall's own servants to defy him: "Hold your hand, my Lord." (III,vii,70) Appalled by Cornwall's excessive brutality, indeed his evil, the servant resists the Duke and fatally wounds him. Cornwall dies as a direct consequence of his excessive cruelty, which in turn is simply part of the evil that has dominated him all along. The same evil that motivates him eventually destroys him.

Another example of the self-destructiveness of evil in *King Lear* is that of the feud between Goneril and Regan over Edmund. Throughout the final two Acts of the play the audience witnesses the two sisters suspiciously and anxiously watching and plotting against each other as they descend the ever-tightening spiral of hatred and lust to the nadir of murder and suicide. By the first scene of Act V Regan tells Edmund that she "shall never endure [Goneril]: dear my Lord,/ Be not familiar with her," and in sharp juxtaposition one line later Goneril states: "I had rather lose the battle than that sister/ Should loosen him and me."(11.15-19) The two sisters are at each other's throats, and by the end of the play their enmity results in their own destruction. Goneril poisons Regan and then commits suicide in the final scene: with almost the clarity and forcefulness of symbolic depiction, evil consumes itself.

That the evil in *King Lear* is self-destructive is, in fact, almost obvious, and this circumstance of the play's action and thought has not escaped the notice of critics. A.C. Bradley, for instance, states that the evil in *King*

Lear is

> ...self-destructive: it sets those beings [i.e. the evil persons in the play] at enmity....Finally, these beings, all five of them, are dead a few weeks after we see them first....[These] are undeniable facts; and in the face of them it seems odd to describe *King Lear* as 'a play in which the wicked prosper' (Johnson).[146]

Bradley's concern for the questions of justice raised in and by *King Lear* aside, his claim that the evil in the play is self-destructive is clear. G. Wilson Knight also claims that "the cruel and wolf-hearted bring disaster on themselves and others: evil mankind is self-slaughterous,"[147] and R.C Bald states that "the evil that has been unleashed brings about its own destruction."[148] Such an interpretation of the events of *King Lear* is unavoidable. In his great denunciation of Goneril and Regan in Act IV, scene ii, even Albany suggests that humanity, driven by unchecked evil impulse, "must perforce prey on itself,/ Like monsters of the deep."(49-50) It is the very nature of evil to "prey on itself", and *King Lear* reveals this truth with dramatic clarity.

What has not been noticed is the connection with the consumption or disappearance of the good that is preyed upon by this evil. Perhaps this is why Lear, Gloucester, even

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[146] A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, second edition (1905; rpt. London: MacMillan, 1964), p.304.
[147] G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire, fourth edition (London: Methuen, 1948), p.206.
[148] R.C. Bald, "'Thou, Nature, Art My Goddess': Edmund and Renaissance Free-Thought" in G. McManaway et.al., eds., Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies (Washington: Folger Library, 1948), p.339.

Kent seem to be "used up" by life in the end. The Fool just vanishes as does the persona Tom, peering over the cliff at the redeemed Gloucester. This diminution and erosion of goodness by the action of evil may be explained by asking the question: How can evil prey on itself if, as the doctrine of privation teaches, it preys on goodness or essential being? The doctrine provides an answer to the seeming contradiction implied by this question: if the presence of evil depends upon the privation of good, then as the evil grows by consuming the good it also, of necessity, consumes itself. Pseudo-Dionysius states that "evil does not exist at all....Evil in its nature is neither a thing nor does it bring anything forth."[149] That is, evil is nothing. Because it is simply the privation of that which already exists, it actually tends toward non-being and its ultimate realization is nothingness:

> No nature is evil so far as it is naturally existent. Nothing is evil in anything save a diminishing of good. If the good is so far diminished as to be utterly consumed, just as there is no good left so there is no existence left.[150]

Evil is destructive, and its activity tends toward the utter annihilation of being (or good); but such an annihilation also destroys the evil itself:

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[149] As quoted in Charlotte Spivack, The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage (London: Associated University Presses, 1978), p.17.

[150] St. Augustine, De Natura Boni, transl. John H.S. Burleigh in Augustine: Earlier Writings, volume 6 of The Library of Christian Classics, John Baillie, et.al., eds. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), pp.330-31.

> Take festering, which men call specifically a festering of the body. Now if there is still something deep in the wound which it can consume the corruption grows as good is diminished. But if there is nothing left to consume, there will be no festering since there will be no good left. There will be nothing for corruption to corrupt; and there will be no festering, for there will be nothing to fester.[151]

The process of evil's growth is the very process of its self-destruction. It depends on the consumption of good for what little existence it has, and as it destroys the good it withdraws from itself the condition of its own existence: it "preys on itself".

In *King Lear* we see that evil is self-destructive because, as it consumes the good upon which it depends, it thereby consumes itself as well. Throughout the play, as we have seen, evil is shown to be self-destructive, but at the same time it destroys the good upon which it feeds. These two seemingly contradictory conditions of evil in the play are entirely compatible, in fact inseparable, properties of evil as privation. Kent speaks of his imminent death as the play ends - "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;/ My master calls me, I must not say no" - and Lear and Cordelia *are* dead at the end of the play, but so are Regan and Goneril. Gloucester, too, is dead at the end, but so is Edmund. Indeed, the littered stage at the close of *King Lear* can be seen as the somewhat symbolic demonstration of evil as privation. As the doctrine states, the evil cannot exist after the good is devoured. If evil grows at the expense of

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[151] Augustine, p.332.

good so successfully that the good is completely consumed, then the evil is also *necessarily* consumed.[152] Thus, as the evil of Regan, Goneril and Edmund reaches its consummation it also achieves its own destruction. A.C. Bradley states the doctrine of privation in his analysis of the evil in *King Lear*: "this evil is *merely* destructive, it founds nothing, and seems capable of existing only on foundations laid by its opposite,"[153] and L.C. Knights claims that the philosophy of the Edmund-Goneril-Regan group, their evil, "has been revealed [at the play's end] as self-consuming,

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[152] Charlotte Spivack explains:

> ...since evil as privation depends upon the good for its very being - or rather, its non-Being - then it must...ultimately destroy itself....even when the appearance of evil looms large, the apparent augmentation is actually a sign of immanent diminution and ultimate disappearan (Spivack, pp.17-18.)
>
> ...evil is not what it seems to be,...it is really nearest destruction when it seems most potent,...it is actually moving towards annihilation when it seems to be soaring with success, [and]...it is literally approaching nothingness when it seems to be everything....(Spivack, p.26.)

Cf. also a passage from Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (IV,ii): "For as thou mayest call a carcasse a dead man, but not simply a man, so I confesse, that the vicious are evill, but I cannot grant that absolutely they are. For that is which retaineth order, and keepeth nature, but that which faileth from this, leaveth also to be that, which it is in his owne nature. But thou wilt say, that evill men can do many things, neither will I deny it, but this their power proceedeth not from forces but from weaknesse. For they can doe evill which they could not doe if they could have remained in the performance of that which is good. Which possibilitie declareth more evidently that they can do nothing. For if, as wee concluded a little before, evill is nothing, since they can only doe evill, it is manifest, that they can doe nothing." (Boethius, Consolation of Philosophy, in the translation of I.T. (1603), ed. William Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press,1963), pp.88-9.)

[153] A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p.304.

its claim to represent strength as a self-bred delusion."[154] In his consideration of the Machiavellian figure in Elizabethan (and presumably Jacobean) tragedy, moreover, (a figure well represented in *King Lear*) H.B. Parkes suggests that:

> ...the Machiavellian himself is interested only in conquering power, not in establishing it on permanent foundations; and when he has (like Marlowe's Mortimer) 'no place to mount up higher', he can only bring destruction upon himself.[155]

Evil can only exist by consuming good and cannot, as Pseudo-Dionysius says, "bring anything forth". All it is is what it can destroy, and once the good has been destroyed "it can only bring destruction upon [itself]."

But one is still faced in life, and at the end of *King Lear*, with the awful ravages of evil: good *is* destroyed by evil; Cordelia *is* dead. To say that evil destroys itself in the course of its destruction of the good is small consolation when faced with the reality that the good has also been destroyed. This is how the tragedy of *King Lear* is so honest to the reality of evil: Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia *do* die. There is no glancing away from this reality of evil - no easy solution of poetic justice that would allow them to live - for evil *is* destructive. The doctrine teaches that the very nature of evil is privation, decay,

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[154] L.C. Knights, "*King Lear* and the Great Tragedies" in Boris Ford, ed. The Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol 2.: The Age of Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p.240.

[155] H.B. Parkes, "Nature's Diverse Laws: The Double Vision of the Elizabethans". Sewanee Review, vol.58, 1950, p.409.

destruction, but the doctrine also teaches that the extent of evil's destruction is limited: it can never destroy goodness completely. Aquinas tells us that "non-being as purely negative assuredly requires no subject. Privation, however, is a *negation in a subject*, as Aristotle says, and evil is that kind of non-being."(emphasis mine)[156] That is, because evil only exists as the privation of good, it is present in existence or creation at all only as the privation of a *particular* good.[157] Thus, in its tendency toward non-being it destroys a particular good, but not goodness itself:

> Evil does not remove all good, but only a particular good of which it is a privation. Blindness removes sight, not the animal. It would disappear if the animal disappeared. Total evil cannot therefore exist; by destroying all good it would destroy itself.[158]

It is certainly true that evil can utterly destroy a particular good or being, but it cannot destroy being itself; it may lead to particular non-being, but never to

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[156] St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, transl. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (London: Blackfriars,1967), part 1,qu.48,art.3.
[157] Charles Journet points out that Aquinas also states this idea in De Malo, qu.1,art.1: "Evil is not anything in reality, but the privation of a *particular* good, inherent in a *particular* being." Pseudo-Dionysius also explains that "evil is not a *total* privation of good, otherwise called nothingness, but the *particular* privation of a good."(Journet's emphasis) Charles Journet, The Meaning of Evil, transl. Michael Barry (New York: P.J. Kennedy and Sons,1963), p.41,footnote 61.
[158] Aquinas,*In IV Ethic. Nic., bk.IV,lect.13* as quoted in Journet; p.63,footnote 10. Aquinas also points to Aristotle's claim "that were evil total it would destroy itself, for the demolition of all good - a necessary condition for evil to be whole and entire - would cut out from under evil its very basis." (Summa Theologica, part.1,qu.49,art.3)

absolute non-being. In a previous chapter we learned that Being-Itself, or God, and all of creation's participation in this Being, is understood by the doctrine as potential: that which creation or a particular creature is or should be by virtue of its essential being. Now although evil may corrupt or completely destroy the *realization* of this potential in a particular being or subject in creation, it can never even touch this potential or essential being itself:

> ...the subject of a privation...is a being in potentiality, and hence, since evil is a privation,...it is the opposite of that particular good which answers to the potentiality in question, not to the supreme good which is pure actuality.[159]

Evil may diminish, even significantly, the particular realization of goodness in creation, but it can never totally eliminate potentiality for goodness, which defines essential being. Aquinas states that good may be "diminished but not wholly taken away by evil," for this good of which he speaks "is the ability of to be actual:"[160]

> [Yet] how can this diminish? Not by the subtraction which applies to quantities, but by the slackening which applies to qualities and forms. This weakening of the ability to be actual can be described from the heightening which is the reverse. This is an intensification through dispositions which prepare the matter for actuality; the more these are repeated in the subject the readier it is to receive form and perfection. And conversely the more this readiness abates because of contrary dispositions... so much the more does the potentiality to be actual grow slack.
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> If then these contrary dispositions...[could] be repeated or grow indefinitely,...[then] the aptness in question [i.e. to receive form and perfection] would be endlessly diminished or

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[159] Aquinas, part 1,qu.49,art.3.
[160] Aquinas, part1,qu.48,art.4.

> weakened. Nevertheless it would never be taken away, for it would always remain at its root which is the substance of the subject. Thus if an infinity of opaque screens were interposed between the sun and the atmosphere, the aptness of the air's capacity to receive light would be indefinitely diminished, but it would never be completely lost, for it is of the nature of air to be translucent.[161]

The relevance of this doctrine to the tragedy, and especially the ending of the tragedy, of *King Lear* is important. We have seen in the last chapter that Cordelia represents the nature of man, that she is the particular good which answers to man's potentiality. Although the evil in the play destroys this particular good, it does not destroy the potentiality of goodness itself. The nature or essential being, or, in terms of the doctrine, the goodness of man that is shown in Cordelia lives on after her death in those three men who still endure. The goodness which defines man as fully human - his potentiality to be actual - is not destroyed with Cordelia, but survives in Edgar, Albany and Kent.[162] Nature itself seems to be exhausted at the end of the play, but an abiding hope seems also to persist. The faint but very real peace that comes from weariness is surely felt at the close of this powerful drama, and this is what is ultimately left to us. Aquinas' opaque screens are

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[161] Aquinas,part 1,qu.48,art.4. Later in the Summa Aquinas states that "even though evil may indefinitely diminish good it can never entirely consume it." (part 1,qu.49,art.3)

[162] It should be remembered that Edgar is given the best statement on the fullness of being and on the absolute reality in human existence of this fullness: it is "all", he suggests, and will therefore endure all. ("Men must endure- Their going hence, even as their coming hither:- Ripeness is all." V,ii,9-11)

there in *King Lear*, but the light they obscure -- the illumination of wisdom that comes from, and to, an existence of love, forgiveness and sacrifice - is never completely lost for *it is of the nature of man* to share in this illumination.

* * *

In the opening scene of the play Lear tells Cordelia that "nothing will come of nothing"(1.89) and later he tells his Fool that "nothing can be made of nothing."(I,iv,130) In light of the doctrine of evil as privation, this statement that "nothing will come of nothing" becomes a very profound and central comment on the evil that is to follow in the play. The doctrine claims that evil is nothing and that it tends toward nothing: 'nothing will come of nothing'. We also see that Lear's statement claims, in the doctrine's own terms, that evil *breeds* evil as well: 'nothing comes of nothing'. Furthermore, evil is simply the privation of good, the privation of that which *is*, and is thus pure destruction and has no positive existence of its own; it "is neither a thing nor does it bring anything forth": nothing comes of nothing. But the final teaching of the doctrine is that evil, by consuming the good upon which its existence

depends, destroys itself: nothing will come of nothing. To suggest that Lear has these meanings consciously in mind when he speaks would be immoderate to say the least, but considered as a choric utterance, blending with Knights' voices which echo throughout the play and point to timeless significances that transcend strict realism, Lear's remark could justifiably be regarded as a commentary on the nature of evil. That is, if Lear is not consciously directing our attention to the question of evil in these lines, then maybe Shakespeare is.

In any case, the play *does* deal with the terrible reality of evil, and to suggest that Shakespeare's attempt to understand this evil was informed by the doctrine of privation is not to deny in any way evil's reality nor its horror. No doctrine can alleviate the outrage and profound discomfort we feel when Lear bears Cordelia "dead in his arms" in the final scene. No doctrine at all can ease the unbearable anguish that Lear suffers in those final moments. But no doctrine intends to ease pain, least of all the doctrine of privation. It attempts to explain reality, not to escape it, and if the reality is painful it can only attempt to explain the pain, not to avoid it. Reality is inescapable. Insofar as *King Lear* deals with the reality of evil honestly it is painful, for the reality is painful, and it must be said that *King Lear is* honest to the reality. But so is the doctrine of privation, a doctrine which teaches how horrible and destructive evil really is, yet also that

it is not the *final* reality.

The encounter with and examination of evil that *King Lear* provides, I have argued, is informed by this doctrine. We learn from the play that there is an order in all of creation that defines what is natural, and that this order - this essential being or nature - is violated, through corruption, by evil. We learn *ultimately* from the play, however, that the order persists. The disturbance of evil spends itself, claiming much of creation as it rages, but in the end the order remains. "We that are young/ Shall never see so much," the solemn Edgar proclaims: the evil that has shaken the Lear universe like a violent storm has passed; it is gone. At the end of the play we are left with the knowledge that evil can never touch that which it does not share - the *essence* of creation, which is goodness. It can only diminish a bit of goodness at a time, and even then the evil itself will disappear once the bit is consumed. But the whole - the order - continues. Perhaps this is what the dying Lear "sees" on the dead lips of Cordelia when he cries, "Look there, look there". Not that Cordelia herself is alive, but that what she is or means in life - the reality of human existence that she represents - is eternal and cannot perish.

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